

The Pilgrims' Service to King & Christ

1 Peter 2:13–17

The Eleventh Sermon on First Peter

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In modern western thought, two polar opposite political ideologies have and been proclaimed. One was that of radicals in England, who said contrary to King Charles I, “No king but Jesus.” The other was that of radicals in France, who said contrary to Louis XVI, “No God, no king.” One was absolute theocracy while the other absolute democracy. Both rejected the ruling authority structures of their day.

We note as we turn again to 1 Peter tonight that Christians in the first century lived under the all-powerful Caesar and that Christians as Christians had no particular rights. We live in a completely different situation in this regard, but together, whether in the first century or now the twenty first we are pilgrims in this world. We are citizens of a heavenly kingdom that has entered this world at the coming of Jesus, yet, we live, move, and have our being among the kingdoms of this world.

And Peter writes to ancient churches, not merely individual Christians, about *the pilgrims' service to king and Christ*. Notice those two points here:

1. ***Our Service to King***
2. ***Our Service to Christ***

Our Service to King

Peter first writes of *our service to king*. He begins by saying, **be subject**. This is what is called a passive verb. The active verb would be, “obey,” but this means to live under those above. And so he goes on to say that we are to **be subject to every human institution**. But note that word translated as “institution.” Literally Peter says “human creature” (*ktisei*). Why would he say it like this? Remember the first century context. The Roman Empire include an emperor cult, that is, worship of the Emperor as god. In World War II Germans say Hitler was a Messianic figure and the Japanese viewed Hirohito as a god; today the North Koreans view their supreme leaders this way. And even when political fervor gets whipped up in our time, we have to remember that Peter is speaking forth a biblical politic: Caesar is a mere creature. He is not the son of any of the gods but a mere man.

Regardless, Christians were to be subject to the Caesars. And Peter gives examples of how to do this practically, since Caesar wasn’t everywhere at once. He ruled through those below him. So Peter says, **whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him**—that is, the emperor—to **punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good** (vv. 13–14). In the words of John Calvin, “Obedience is due to all who rule, because they have been raised to that honour not by chance, but by God’s providence.”¹

¹ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 12:270.

An illustration of this is Abraham in Genesis 21 as he makes a covenant with pagan Abimelech. In other words, as Paul says, Abraham was the heir of all things (Rom. 4), yet at the same time his example shows that he was also one who respected authority because as a pilgrim this life as it is now is not our homeland. And so we are to subject ourselves now in hope of a better world to come in the future.

Now, this brings up some practical questions. First, is this subjection absolute? No. As Peter says, **be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution** (v. 13). He also says that the purpose of government is that malefactors must be punished while benefactors be praised.² And so we subject ourselves in all things lawful. We cannot subject ourselves for the Lord's sake to murder, injustice, etc. Thus as our forefathers understood, this qualified subjection implies that we are also called to resistance of unjust laws. It is better to obey God than man like the Egyptian midwives, like the Magi, and like the apostles. Another practical question is, "What if a nation has been unjustly conquered and taken from another or what if those in power are there illegitimately?" We are still to be subject to them while they are in office.³ As Calvin said, "Some kind of government, however deformed and corrupt it may be, is still better and more beneficial than anarchy."⁴

² Luther, 74.

³ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 12:270.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 12:271.

Our Service to Christ

Peter also writes of *our service to Christ*. Again he says, **be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution** (v. 13). Our subjection to government in lawful things is worship of the Lord through the means of honoring the authorities. How am I to worship Christ by honoring those over me? First, since it is their task to punish evil, don't do evil; second, since it is their task to praise good, do good (v. 14). In fact, Peter even says this is God's will for you and me.

And notice the evangelistic purpose of all this. When we do good we **silence the ignorance of foolish people** (v. 15). "Fool" in Scripture does not mean that unbelievers are dumb, but that they are morally debased. Our subjection, obedience, and honor while doing good and refraining from evil preaches practically the law to our neighbors. It shows them that God is real, that he is alive, that we do live good lives, and that they are on the wrong side of the issue.

Peter then explains this further. We are free, yet we are slaves: **Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God** (v. 16). Remember what he said back in 1:18. We were ransomed from the futile ways of our forefathers. And so we are to live as pilgrim people in three ways: first, as free; second, as holy; and third, as slaves.

"I'm free in Christ." That's what a man once told me while I was an intern in Doon, Iowa. And he said in the context of not paying his taxes for years and years. I told him then what I would say to you now: Yes, in terms of the law's

condemnation, we are freed from the law. But in terms of sanctification, we are freed to serve, empowered to live according to it. In the words of Calvin, we have “a free servitude, and a serving freedom.”⁵

Finally, in verse 17 Peter gives us a list of groups that we are to apply all this towards. First, in our relationships to the world around us we are to **honor everyone**. Second, in our relationships among one another as brothers and sisters we are to **love the brotherhood**. Go back to 1:22 to see this described. Third, in our relationships with the Lord himself we are to **fear God**. Keep that word **fear** circled because it comes into contrast with the fourth group: in our relationships with the highest authority in our nation, whether the emperor, the king, the president, or whomever is the leader we are to **honor the emperor**.

Peter reserves **fear** only for God while he says we offer a lower form of service to the emperor in terms of honor. Why is this key? Obviously because we follow the first commandment and worship only God. But also, Caesar proclaimed himself divine but Peter says the Gospel has a politic: we worship God and he is not Caesar!

Brothers and sisters, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that you have been freed from the condemnation of your sins so that you may be empowered in the sanctification of your lives towards civil authority, but towards the highest authority of all, God himself. Amen.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 12:272.