

## *Living as Free Men*

1 Peter 1:11-17

7/4/2021

Stan Long

Thank you for the invitation to preach, particularly on the Fourth of July, kind of a special occasion, which takes me to why I'm preaching on this passage. Again, I know there is a summer series on the Psalms. But when I realized it was the Fourth of July, I said, you know, I might—this message is an adaptation of a message that I preached at the church where I am the interim pastor right now, Grace Reformed in Relay. And I preached this sermon in January after the January insurrection or whatever happened at the Capitol. It was the Sunday after that where I moved off of the sermon series and said, let me talk about what it means to be part of a nation as Christians. And so I thought, Fourth of July? Maybe something I have to say in that message would help us here today.

So I want to read the text of scripture. I know with some churches, as the scripture is read, people stand. Do you do that here? I don't want to force you to do that. Do you stand when the scripture is read? Or do you just—I will read the scripture. It's 1 Peter 2:11-17. Is it on the overhead? I don't know. Get your Bibles out or your screens out. There it is. Very good. The ESV translation.

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 visitation.

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. Fear God. Honor the emperor. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Father, I pray these words would speak to our hearts and give us a sense of appreciation for who you are and who we are before you as your people. Lord, bless this time in your word. In Jesus's name. Amen.

"America, America, God shed his grace on thee. Crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea." It's a song. It's more than a song, though. It's a prayer, isn't it? America is as divided now as it was during the 1960's. It's possibly as divided as it was in the 1860's. You remember what happened in the 1860's, don't you? I'm not totally surprised by this, but I'm deeply troubled by this. And I hope you are, too. What's even more troubling is the lack of sane, peaceful voices from the church of Jesus Christ speaking into this.

We hear the political rhetoric on the right and the political rhetoric on the left, and we somehow feel that as citizens of this nation, we're compelled to take sides. We need to carefully biblically critique the voices on both sides, asking the simple question, what does scripture say? And we'll find that sometimes those on the left have some solid biblical grounds for what they're doing and feeling and saying, and sometimes those on the right do as well. We as believers in Jesus Christ need to speak with a third voice, a third voice. The voice of the Spirit of God that comes from the word of God. You see, the

Spirit desires to speak words of truth and grace into every situation and every discussion that we're having.

My title is "Live as Free Men." The generic "men," meaning free people, free men. It reminds me of a song from my youth. I'm aging myself. "People Everywhere Just Got to be Free." How many remember The Rascals? Come on now. "People Everywhere Just Got to be Free." But only believers in Jesus Christ, Spirit-filled people, can truly grasp and then promote the kind of freedom that's needed. Jesus said, when "the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." True human freedom, you see, can only come when we reject evil and commit ourselves to doing good. Ultimately, we only understand what is good when we look to the word of God.

The context of 1 Peter—we're jumping into a passage here. Peter's been writing about the identity of his readers, the saints, the aliens, those who are foreigners, exiles, the saints. In verses 9-10 of chapter 2, he says, this.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. [ESV]

You're sojourners, exiles. You're living among the Gentiles. Those two verses, he's trying to give them an identity, that you are now the continuation. You're the new Israel. You are God's people. Those are phrases from different portions of the Old Testament, from Exodus and Hosea and Isaiah. He's bringing all these Old Testament words about the identity of God's people and saying, "You saints of God, New Testament saints, you are the new Israel. Now you're God's people."

I'm going to look at two sections here as we look at these verses. I'm going to look at verses 13 to 16 and talk about the foundations of our freedom, and then verse 17, which is the key verse, the obligations of our freedom. But we're going to talk about, first, the foundations of freedom.

First, we need a biblical commitment to good human government, as I see here. Look at verse 13. "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." Peter is agreeing with Paul, who in Romans 13 says something very similar to this. He's saying that the emperor is on top. He's the top dog. He's the one with the top human authority, and under him there's governors. There are lesser authorities. Both of these authorities have been given from God the permission, the authority, the delegated power to punish or praise, to punish evil and praise that which is good. And that's what good government should be doing.

The NIV Study Bible says this. Live as free men "does not authorize rebellion against constitutional authority, but it urges believers freely to submit to God and to earthly authorities as long as such submission does not conflict with the law of God." Now, lots of citizens have understandings of freedom that have gotten then so riled up for change that they have taken to the streets. We know that. We've seen that. The far left in many cities last summer took to the streets. The far right took to the Capitol building in January. You know that. Both sides have a vision for what America needs to become. The frustrations of both camps motivated by rhetoric from their preferred political leaders boiled over into violence.

What we need is a biblical understanding of the source of goodness. Look at verse 15. This is the will of God, that by doing good, you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people." There are foolish people. There are wise people. In terms of distinguishing what is good and evil, what is nothing

and what is hateful, what is helpful and what is harmful, the only ultimate definer of that is God. And we only know what He thinks about these things as He reveals them in His word, the holy word of God.

What do the scriptures say? Here are five foundational gospel truths that we need to understand as we think about goodness and this capacity of man to create goodness in society. Well, the first foundational point is that all people are created by God for His glory. That's why our nation has warnings about cruel and unusual punishment, by the way, because everyone is created in the image of God. But all people fall short of the glory of God. Romans tells us that. That's why our nation has laws, to govern behavior, and police to enforce laws, and prisons for those convicted of law-breaking. And God has established that. God establishes that.

Human nature within all people needs to be checked. We're all a mess. That's why our nation encourages various methods for the socialization of people, of young people, mothers and fathers, family, school clubs, athletic teams, community organizations. Other institutions are encouraged to train us in the important principles of mutual cooperation urging, sometimes even through social pressure, to conform to the norms of civil behavior. Internalized self-discipline is the goal rather than the external discipline that must rightly be done through law enforcement or judicial processes. We have a political system of checks and balances because they rightly understood that evil power in the heart of one person can grow and act out more quickly than evil power within the varied hearts of a group of people, because there has to be some communication between those people that want to do evil. But if it's just you as a totalitarian, it happens real fast, right?

The founders understood something about the nature of human beings. Human nature, when it's not checked, we're never far from anarchy and chaos. The late Chuck Colson said, "People who cannot restrain their own basic instincts, who cannot treat one another with civility, are not capable of self-government." Colson added, "Without virtue, a society can be ruled only by fear, a truth that tyrants understand all too well." Human nature within us needs to be checked.

The fourth thing about the foundational truths from God's word is that human nature within all people can be changed. That's this thing we call the gospel. Amen? That Jesus Christ changes people. Although we're a mess, we don't have to remain a mess. Gospel transformation, that's why the government encourages gospel proclamation, though through granting non-profit status to religious institutions. That's the reason why that happens.

Now, there's been a problem. You see, because the gospel's the pathway for us to experience true freedom as a society. Jesus said, "The Son sets you free, you'll be free indeed." The problem is this. Many on the far left, they reject the gospel of God. Many on the far right, they distort the gospel of God. It's only the true gospel of Jesus Christ, the third voice, that can solve the extremism that we see in our world and in our nation today. And it begins with individuals, doesn't it? It begins with me and you confessing our sin, repenting, and turning to Jesus Christ as our only hope. I trust you've done that, that you understand the free forgiveness that Jesus Christ gives. And the Spirit of God is transforming your heart. The word of God is transforming your mind, and your life is being changed. Human nature can be changed.

And the fifth principle is a high percentage of transformed people produces a good nation, which is what we're looking for. A high percentage of transformed people produces a good nation. Apostle Paul says elsewhere that the "Holy Spirit is the restrainer." It's in 1 Thessalonians 1. He's the restrainer. He holds back. He restrains evil in the world. Spirit-filled people are the salt of the earth, Matthew 5, slowing down the decay. Spirit-filled people are the light shining like a flashlight in a dark cave.

We're created for God by God for His glory. We all fall short of that glory. So human nature needs to be checked. But the gospel changes people and changes people in high numbers. It produces a nation

that becomes a nation that's pretty good.

We need to also understand something about human freedom. Verse 16 talks about this. "Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God." When you hear the word "freedom," the common understanding most people have is that freedom is you do what you want to do, right? Well, not only is that not the biblical understanding, but it's not even the civil understanding. That's not what freedom is. Freedom is not having no limits. In fact, that's impossible for us as humans to have no limits. Freedom is doing what you ought, what you were intended to do, what you were created to do. That's what freedom is. A bird is designed to be free, to thrive in the sky. Put a bird in the water where a fish belongs. That bird's going to have some problems underwater. Put a fish in the air, and it's not going to fly very long. A train is designed to be free on tracks. Put a train on the interstate and see what happens. It would have problems. Humans are designed to be free to thrive when we live as mandated by the master designer. True human freedom can only come when we reject evil and commit to doing good, and God is the one who tells us that which is good.

See, the first recipients of Peter's letter know these truths. They're simple truths. They're believers of the gospel. And verse 17 gives marching orders to them and to all believers who are living in a pagan world. Verse 17 gives these marching orders for us about how to live in light of the freedom that we have. These are people who understand that our ultimate and most important citizenship is not in Rome. For us, it's not in America. As Paul told the church in Philippians, "Your citizenship is in heaven." That's foundational. These are people who understand that we are to render to Caesar that which is Caesar's but render to God that which is God's. These are people who understand that true freedom carries with it important responsibilities and obligations.

Now, remember, these verses are coming from the pen of Simon Peter. And do you remember in the gospels who Simon Peter was? Simon Peter is the guy who—on the night Jesus was betrayed, before that in the garden, Peter's the one who took out the sword to kill the soldier who's going to arrest Jesus. Remember that? And trust me, Peter wasn't just looking for an ear, which is all he got. Peter was looking for the whole head. The guy ducked. The guy wasn't no dummy. He ducked. And what did Jesus do? Jesus healed the man. It wasn't the way. Violence was not the way of the kingdom of Jesus. It's not His way. Peter learned that. Peter learned that.

So what are some obligations? Verse 17 is a very interesting verse. He gives obligations that we have towards our freedom, and there's four of them. Let me first talk about the structure of them because the structure is very interesting. "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor." Notice that the first one and the fourth one both are about honor. Okay? "Everyone" and "emperor" are kind of distant relationships that we might have. The ones in the middle, "brotherhood" and "God," hopefully are intimate and more close relationships that we have. So there's kind of an ABBA thing going on there. But there's also an AABB thing going on because A and B, "everyone" and "brotherhood," are people. "God" and "emperor" are authorities.

Now, this verse comes at the end of a paragraph, which we looked at the paragraph. And the paragraph began with him talking about government, submitting to government. So he's trying to conclude this thought, this paragraph, about our responsibilities to government. But to do that—before he says the final thing, "Honor the emperor," he wants to put that in the context of these other three relationships.

First one, "Honor everyone." That's the first obligation. Peter doesn't say that everyone is worthy of honor in their actions and their character. No. We honor all people because all people were created by God. Even if they think they're the accidental products of evolutionary processes, they were created by God for God with dignity and purpose. And we are to honor everyone. It doesn't say to honor everyone

when you feel like it. It doesn't say that. It says, "Honor everyone."

The command to honor parents, for example, is often difficult for many people. But it's an example for us. To obey them is absolutely not what's in mind. It doesn't say to obey your parents, except in Ephesians, which is a whole different discussion. Ephesians says "little kids" there. It says, "Honor parents." And even that's a tough one for some people. You've probably been rightly told that they're not to be honored for what they have done but for who they are as unique givers of your life. It means a recognition of their authority even if they exercise that authority imperfectly. And guess what? They're sinners. They do, and they did.

But the same is true here. "Honor everyone" as people who, just like you, were created in God's image, not because they're perfect or because they treat you well. Maybe they don't. We'll figure out more of what that means. All people have not only total depravity, as we reformed people like to say, but total dignity. That's true. That's the scriptures.

Now, we honor our fellow citizen every day in many practical ways. I said, "every day." I guess this is in the post-COVID world. Standing in line even when it's inconvenient, why don't you just go first? Because you honor the other people. I say that in my mind because I was just at General Assembly. There's lots of lines at General Assembly. And don't go to the airport. There's lots of lines in life right now. We honor each other by waiting our turn and not butting in line. By being courteous to the person on the phone who put you on hold, remembering that it really isn't their fault. There's just a line ahead of you. They're only part of an organization, a sinful organization that's part of a system that maybe isn't even working well. Patience. We honor people. We honor the waitress by leaving a tip for the restaurant. We honor people we come into contact with. We honor strangers. We honor people when we have clothes that no longer fit but are still good clothes by not trashing them, but by giving them to the Goodwill or the Salvation Army so that someone can use them. That's honoring everyone. It's part of our responsibility as believers to not be wasteful and to help the poor and those who need it. Those are examples. The point is as citizens in this land, we have a responsibility to give to all people, the rich, the poor, black and white, brown and yellow, young and old, the born and the unborn, the police or the thugs, the immigrant, the citizen, everyone created by God in His image.

Now, our laws don't demand that we believe in God, but our national laws do demand that we honor those laws and follow them. And doing so ultimately shows respect for fellow creatures of God. Honor everyone.

The second one is, "Love the brotherhood." My mind goes to John Stott, the late great John Stott in a message in one of the first PCRT conferences in Philadelphia that I attended with some students. I'll never forget his exposition of Acts 2. But he had a little ditty there that I've never forgotten. He said, "To dwell above with the saints above, my, that would be glory. But to dwell below with the saints I know, that's a different story." John Stott always hit the home run. "Love the brotherhood." That's not always easy, but it's always a command of God.

Now, the Bible does make a distinction. Yes, we are to love everyone. We're also, as Christ's followers, to have a special kind of love for the brotherhood, for those that are in the family of God, for all those who, like Jesus, cry out, "Our Father who art in heaven." There's a special bond that we're to have with the body of Christ. God has created a family that crosses the barriers of language, of culture, ethnicity, of national borders, of economic system, of age, of gender, or mental capacity, and so forth. The truth is that the bond we have in Christ should be stronger than all other human bonds or identity markers that we might have. Romans 12:9 says, "Let love be genuine or sincere." In other words, don't let your love be shallow or phony. Obviously, you can't have a deep relationship with everyone, but you need to have a deep relationship with someone. And some of those deep relationships need to reflect the

breath of the body of Christ. 1 John 4, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God. Whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love." How much more simple can it be? You say you love the one whose love dwells in you? Then that love should show forth from you. It's a simple thing that the New Testament wants us to understand.

See, one reason for the fall of the western Roman Empire was that a small but powerful group of people, people who refused to declare Caesar as Lord but declared that Jesus is Lord, they humbly served a broken world. Some of them died by the hands of the Roman leaders. But they continued to love one another, and they grew stronger and stronger and bigger and bigger despite the deaths and the persecution that took place. Simple radical revolutionary courageous culture-changing love is what changed the world.

And Peter pivots away from this vertical relationship to the people to talk about the horizontal obligations there. Excuse me. I'm backwards. He gets to the vertical now from the horizontal. And the third one is fearing God. "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor." See, the ultimate authority over us is God. And notice he puts that in. Before the king, before the emperor, he puts God. We are to fear Him first. The Old Testament says that the beginning of wisdom is fear. It's not the end but the beginning of wisdom. I believe that the end of wisdom is grace. It's not a verse in the Bible, but that's what I think. That's what I say. Fear is the beginning. "It was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." Somebody said that somewhere or heard that song, "Amazing Grace."

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 at the end of this book, where he's been talking about life and what life's about, and how can we live our life, and what's the ultimate life, the prophet there says, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." That's how the book of Ecclesiastes comes to an end. "Fear God." NIV Study Bible says this. "Reverent fear is not terror but the wholesome reverence and respect for God, which is the basis for all godly living."

Often, children fear parents and then come to love parents and appreciate them. My dad, may he rest in peace—it wasn't really until high school that I really began to appreciate him and understand him and love him. Because my dad was—he was in the military, and that was okay. He was a deacon in the church. That was okay. He worked hard. My mom's the one who had more of an influence on me and my sisters in those early years. But in high school when we began to deepen our relationship, me and my dad, that's when I began to realize that he wasn't just the authority at home. He loved me, and the things he did was because he loved me. I began to understand something about authority and fear and love, and how they blended together.

The fourth exhortation, the obligation, for those who want to be free is, "Honor the emperor." Again, it wraps up this paragraph that Peter's been giving us. Peter himself was martyred, you know, in Rome. He was crucified upside down. He said, "I'm not worthy to die like my savior. If you're going to crucify me, crucify me upside down." Earlier, the apostle Paul had been martyred in Rome as well. Rome, the capitol of the great empire, the powerful vast empire, controlled varying portions of the world for over a thousand years. The church of Rome worshiped right there in the shadows of the most influential political power brokers of their generation. Both Peter and Paul eventually died through Roman emperors, and they challenged their proclamation of Jesus as rival lord. And that's why the emperors killed them.

History in fact tells us that Emperor Nero, who was ruling during that time, was a murderous sex-addicted mad man. He really was. And yet Peter says, "Honor the emperor." Human government is to be honored. Jesus showed honor to the government during his trial. Think about it. Likewise, Paul honored

the Roman governor during his trials in Acts.

The implication for us in 2021 is that whether you are under the administration of President Trump or President Biden, you must honor that man. Honor their position. As believers, we do that knowing that they are accountable to a higher authority, our God.

Four simple commands. "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king." The ESV Study Bible summarizes this. In verses 16-17, it says, "Freedom is not a license to sin but expresses itself in devotion to what is good." It cites Galatians 5:13-14. "All people deserve the same honors and respect as the emperor. Only God is to be feared. Believers should have a tender love for each other as members of the same family."

In Romans, Paul gives a treatise of what can happen in a society in Romans 1. He talks about the gospel of Christ. He says, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ" because it's a powerful message that transformed people. It transforms Jews and Greeks, he says there. It's the power of God.

But then he talks about the rejection of that gospel, the rejection of God and the gospel of God. And then he talks about the idolatrous self-love that happens unless we repent. And then he talks about how we're given over, and the next stage in the devolution of human society is sexual immorality gone wild. And the step after that, unless there's repentance or revival, is sexual perversion gone wild. But it doesn't stop there. Look at Romans 1:28-32, total societal chaos, which is the next phase.

America was birthed as an experiment in order of liberty, many say, as a self-governed people who would not be bound by kings or dictators but would create laws that encouraged cooperation whereby the needs of one's neighbor were seen as important, where we do to others as we wish they would do to us. That's what the founders dreamed of, and eventually to some degree, they established that. They were tired of the schisms and the fighting they had experienced in Europe as one country would battle their neighbor country for turf and for power. Yes, they were idealistic, but they believed it could happen in the new world.

And American economic success and military might created a nation like no other, powerful, prosperous, committed to the flourishing of all people, not just here but other lands. We have our incredible legacy of international aid. We recognize the great slogan of Lady Liberty on Ellis Island, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Allusions to John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay and America being a city on a hill.

But hear me now, saints. We are now before our very eyes seeing the potential for this imperfect but great system to be riddled powerless or even destroyed. There are loud, very loud, visions for America that we are hearing. One vision looks at America as a nation that has a very horrible past. Correcting her wrongs means lots of pain that may not be worth it. So they just say, some of them, to tear the system down. And any who would dare to not see America as an essentially evil nation must obviously be demonized, silenced, and cancelled. And then there's the other vision that sees the nation as the greatest gift to the human race while overlooking flaws. This vision looks to America as a last hope for the world. So obviously, those who would challenge the greatness of America are to be demonized, silenced, and cancelled. These people want to return to the glory days that weren't glorious for everybody. Both sides have their pet Bible verses to bolster their case.

However, neither of these visions is adequate. God is building a people from the right and from the left who will put the word of God, the gospel of God, the Spirit of God ahead of all alternative systems of the world. It's called the kingdom of God.

Paul wrote a letter to the capitol city of the Roman empire declaring, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the righteousness of God for the Jew first and for the Greek." The Jews are those who have the Bible and the grace of God, and the Greeks are those who didn't. It doesn't matter. There's only one solution. The gospel of Jesus Christ.

Saints, we need to see America as a pagan nation. We need to see America as a pagan nation. There are really no Christian nations. There are only nations that for a measure of time enjoy a large measure of gospel influence. Is America imperfect? Yes. Has America been heavily influenced for good in a major way by the Christian gospel? Yes. But we'd better wake up and see that there have been cracks in our foundation as a nation that are growing bigger and bigger during our generation. Saints, we need to pray, and we need to cling to the third way, the way of Jesus, the way of the kingdom. And we need to remember that someday, America and the American system will be destroyed.

Daniel 2:44. Read the book of Daniel. It's a great book for our time. Daniel says this in verse 44 as he's interpreting the vision. "In the days of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever." I urge you to dig into Daniel and his three friends. They understood this stuff that we're going through. They understood they had obligations to Babylon, but they understood that Babylon wasn't sovereign. God was sovereign. The Lord Almighty alone is king.

As citizens of America during this generation, we would like to see America sustained as a major influence in the world, wouldn't we? Sure. But we know that at some point, it will end. So what do we do as believers? We honor everyone made in God's image. We love the family of God and treat each other right. We fear God, who is the ultimate authority, the ultimate king over us. We're honoring His word by not compromising His word just for the sake of people. And we do honor human government that's over us, not as absolute. There came a time when the government said to Daniel, "You have to pray to me." And Daniel walked up the steps into the tower, opened the windows so everybody could see, and prayed to God, not to the king. There is a time when they have to do that. But those with real authority, some did it from on high, they should promote good, wellbeing, and blessing for both saints and sinners.

As believers in Jesus Christ living in a pagan land, we need to sing, we need to pray, "America, America, America. God, please shed your grace." Let's pray.

Lord, the situation in our world and in our nation is not an unusual situation. Believers throughout history have wrestled with things we're wrestling with. I pray we'd look to the saints of old, and most of all look to the word of God for how we're to live in this context in which we live. Remind us that we have a kingdom that's unshakeable and cannot be discarded or tossed aside by the kingdoms of this world. They will all someday bow to Jesus Christ because He is king of kings and lord of lords. May we do that now and may we honor Him now in our own lives each day, and we'll give you thanks. It's in His name we pray. Amen. Amen.