

## FIRST PETER

### Lesson 11

#### The Christian and Government

##### 1 Peter 2:13-17

There are two subjects which will always spark a healthy discussion, sometimes even a heated argument: religion and politics. Most people try to keep these subjects separate, but this is impossible for a Christian because he believes God is sovereign over all, even in the political realm. To remove God from politics is to leave this area of life to atheistic and humanistic thinkers which will ultimately bring chaos to any society. A case in point is the French Revolution which was led by brilliant intellectuals who were infidels. Only about seventeen years after this bloody revolution, when the aristocracy was thrown out, the French accepted another monarch, Napoleon, a dictator.

Christians need to know what relationship they sustain to the government they find themselves under, for Christians are in every nation on this earth. They need to know how deeply they should get involved in the political arena and what limitations should be placed on their political activities. They need to know when they can revolt and when they must submit.

While the Bible does not specifically support any form of government *per se*, it does give principles whereby Christians can live under any government, whether a monarchy (rule by a dictator), aristocracy (rule by a privileged class), republic (rule by the people through representatives) or democracy (rule by the people).

By way of review, we should seek to understand 1 Peter 2:13-17 in light of the context. These verses are only a part of one section of the epistle, 2:11—3:12. The first part of the section calls these Christians “aliens” and “strangers,” because they were heavenly citizens moving through this world on a journey to heaven. As aliens and strangers, they might conclude that they had no social or political responsibilities on the earth. Perhaps they thought that because they belonged to heaven, they could remove themselves from the mainstream of society.

In 2:12, Peter tells these Christians that they are to keep their “*behavior excellent among the Gentiles*” and continually do “good deeds” to keep down slander against them from the unsaved Gentiles and the Roman government which accused them of being “evil doers.” Then in 2:13—3:7, Peter begins to tell them in specific ways how they are to live as Christians on this earth, even though they are citizens of heaven. They are to live in a Christian way towards civil government (2:13-17), towards slaves and masters—in modern language employer-employee relations—(2:18-25) and towards wives and husbands—in marriage—(3:1-7).

The good deeds the unsaved are to see are many, but at the base of it all is the concept of submission. This is a foundational principle for all Christian living. In 2:13, we read, “*Submit yourselves . . . to every human institution.*” In 2:18, it says, “*Servants (slaves) be submissive to your masters.*” In 3:1, it says, “*Wives be submissive to your own husbands.*”

The word “submit” means “to put oneself under another” or “to rank oneself under another.” Submission is a voluntary decision, an act whereby one puts himself under another person or group. Submission in any realm is not just getting along with someone with whom we agree. No, submission is voluntarily placing oneself under someone or some group when we disagree. With this background, let us proceed to expound the text.

## **SUBMISSION TO GOVERNMENT (2: 13-14a)**

### **“Submit yourselves . . . to every human institution”**

Submission is to be given by the Christian to every human institution, and in this context Peter is speaking about civil government. “Human institutions” may refer to the state, the family, the household, social groups within society and the church, even though the immediate context is about submission to government. Christians are not only heavenly citizens, they are also earthly citizens, and they can be and should be better citizens of the state than unbelievers. Actually they show their fidelity to Christ by their loyalty to the state.

To put this command into modern English we might say, “Be subject to the establishment.” The Apostle Paul, in Romans 13:1, said essentially the same thing: *“Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities.”*

Whatever kind of government a Christian finds himself under, be it dictatorship, proletariat, republic or democracy, he is to be in submission to it. This statement by Peter and the statement by Paul have profound significance when we realize that these men were writing to Christians who were living under one of the most imperial monsters and tyrannical dictators of all time—Nero, Emperor of Rome. This statement is even more potent when we realize that both Peter and Paul were executed by the state under Nero’s bloody reign. Peter was crucified upside down and Paul was beheaded.

### **“for the Lord’s sake.”**

Christians are to submit to government for the Lord’s sake. This is the motive for such dutiful obedience and conformity to government, good or bad, because our Lord has asked us to do it. Some have translated this “because of the Lord’s cause.” If this is correct, then the Lord’s cause is ultimately to win men to Christ. If Christians get the reputation of being political reactionaries, then they may bring a bad name on Christ and lose their testimony to the unsaved world.

### **“whether to a king as one in authority or to governors”**

The “king” here is a reference to the Roman emperor and Nero in particular (John 19:15). The “governors” refer to the Roman provincial governors such as Felix, Festus and Pontius Pilate.

To put this on our level as Christians in any country of the world, we are required to obey and submit to all civil rulers. Our Lord made this very plain when He said,

*“Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”*

## **SOVEREIGN APPOINTMENT BY GOD (2:14b)**

### **“as sent by him”**

This reference may be to the Roman emperor who set chief magistrates over various provinces, delegating his sovereign stately authority to them. It may, however, refer to God who is the supreme sovereign over all human governments which have come into existence through His divine plan. This interpretation is probably correct, and it is consistent with Romans 13:1 which says, *“For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.”*

All governmental rulers are in power and are ruling because God appoints all rulers either by direction or permission. The authority behind all government on earth is God. Good government as well as bad government derives its authority from God. Whether democratic, fascist or communistic, all are ordained of God. This does not mean, however, that God approves of everything which goes on in these governments, for He hates sin wherever it is found. Yet, there is one thing worse than being under a bad government, and that is to be under no government where anarchy reigns.

Absolutely no one gets into political office without God somehow being in control to bring about His ends.

*“By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice” (Prov. 8:15).*

*“He removes kings and establishes kings” (Dan. 2:21).*

*“That the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes, and sets over it the lowliest of men” (Dan. 4:17).*

*“The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Prov. 21:1).*

God raised up Pharaoh to sit on the throne of Egypt. He placed cold-blooded Nebuchadnezzar on his throne. Cruel Pilate operated within God’s sovereign control. Remember, Christian, the worst kind of government is better than no government at all.

From the Bible we understand that it is not elections or revolutions which put governments into power; it is God. Elections and revolutions are only the instruments by which God works His will. Every government which exists is held in the palm of God’s hand; it can only go as far as He wills; it is under His control because it has been ordained by Him.

The reason a Christian is to submit to the government over him, whether good or bad, is that government is from God. When the Christian is obeying government, he is obeying God. By obeying the government, He is a testimony to the governing officials that salvation in Christ makes one a better citizen of the state.

Obedience to government is a hard pill to swallow, for men would like to think that God is behind governments like America, England and France, but has nothing to do with governments like Russia, China and Cuba. There is no doubt that some governments are better than others and provide a more wholesome seedbed for Christianity to flourish.

Yet, because all government is ordained of God, Christians inside of Russia, China and Cuba must be in subjection, even when they do not agree with it, if they are going to be faithful to God.

Christians are placed in various countries to be a witness to the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus the Lord. Obviously, if a Christian is in trouble with his government, he cannot be an effective witness to his countrymen. Christians are the salt of the earth and are lights to the world; their primary task in life is to reach as many people as possible with the message of Christ.

*When Carol and I were in communist Romania in 1977, we had dinner with a lovely Christian family. They had two boys. Mircha was studying to be a doctor and Radu was a printer, but he had just come out of the Romanian army. In their front room, which was ever so small, we sat around and sang songs while the young men played their guitars. We sang "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art" and other Christian songs. They sang in Romanian and we in English. Perhaps sweeter fellowship I will never have this side of glory.*

*After we stopped singing, I got into a conversation with Radu who spoke some English. He told me about how he suffered as a Christian in the Romanian army. Then I asked him, "Do you love your country?" He said, "Yes." I then asked, "Would you go to war against the USA?" He answered, "I would if my government told me to do so." Then I said, "Radu, if I were an American soldier and you knew I was a Christian, could you kill me?" He said, "I would not want to kill you or anyone in war, but if I had to it would be an act of war. If you were a Christian, I would just have to place you and me into the hands of God, for heaven is our destiny."*

This conversation showed me more than all the books that have been written on the subject that the spiritual nation of God transcends all political, economic and military barriers. Surely these verses make it very clear that Christians are not to have any part in an armed revolution against an established government. This is true even when the government is unjust.

No civil government or political regime will always conform to the will of God. Yet, at the core of all civil government, there is some justice. That is what keeps things stable. In Romans 13:2, Paul says, *"Therefore, he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves."* This is quite clear; the Christian is to have no part in armed rebellion or revolution against his government. Within national entities, government establishes order for society so the sinful human race can survive. Revolution means the breakdown of all political, economic and social order and this results in national chaos. Revolution is not God's way because it sets in motion terrible forces in society which will rend and destroy it.

Because we live in a fallen society, and men would otherwise devour one another, there needs to be some agency to maintain law and order and justice. Civil government provides order. Therefore, for a Christian to rebel and try to overthrow the government is to rebel against God. Never does Scripture offer armed rebellion as an option. David would not strike Saul because Saul was the Lord's anointed. Saul was the power that

ruled. Daniel and his friends obeyed God but without raising their fists at the king of Babylon. Likewise, the early Christians did not bow to the emperor as god, but neither did they seek to overthrow him by violence.

If Christians are to submit to the government over them, does this imply blind submission? Should they take the attitude, “What will be will be”? No, there are times when a Christian will have to oppose his government, not primarily for political reasons but for religious reasons. Should there ever be a law which prohibits something God Himself commands, or should there be one that commands something God prohibits, then we must respectfully disobey our government and obey God as did the Apostles.

*“And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, ‘We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.’ But Peter and the apostles answered and said, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’” (Acts 5:27-29).*

If the state should say we Christians can no longer tell people about Christ, pray, read the Bible or meet together collectively, then we must disobey in order to give allegiance to our God. If the state should command us to support murder through abortion, force our children to be instructed in paganism and humanism, or insist that we should bow down to the state or man as god, then we would have to disobey, knowing full well the consequences, but it is better to obey God than man. It would be better to be thrown into prison or martyred than to break any of God’s moral laws.

Does this mean that Christians are to have nothing to do with politics? Absolutely not. We are citizens of the state and as citizens we must seek to move our state to a moral posture which would be consistent with or tolerant to our Christian faith but which would also tolerate the multitude of unbelievers in our state. Submission to government does not mean that a Christian cannot agitate legally for better government if the steps do not lead to violence. Where the social law is hard and unreasonable, legitimate protest, not disobedience, is the duty of the Christian. Submission to government does not mean that a Christian cannot lawfully protest against evil and corruption in his government.

Christians, of all people, should be interested in politics because God is interested in politics. However, a Christian must be careful not to get the reputation of being a political agitator or reactionary because this will hurt his testimony before the unsaved world.

## **SOCIAL ORDER MAINTAINED BY GOVERNMENT (2:14c)**

### **“for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right”**

Government exists to put down evil acts and maintain order, but it also exists to reward those who are good citizens by protecting their persons and property, by defending their rights and perhaps by putting them in office because they are loyal to the state. Again, the Apostle Paul says the same thing in Romans:

*“For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil” (Rom. 13:3-4).*

## **SILENCING FOOLISH MEN (2:15)**

### **“For such is the will of God”**

It is the will of God for Christians to be in subjection to the government they find themselves under.

We do not have to pray as to the fact that we are to be obedient to government because the Bible has already commanded it. We may have to pray for grace to be obedient or ask God for the removal of bitter spirits over things done poorly by our government, but the fact of obedience is an established one.

### **“that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.”**

Usually men in government are ignorant of the beliefs and practices of Christians; therefore, Christians are to live such good lives that government officials will take notice and stop their unfounded slandering of Christians. Good works will put the Christian on the best side of the government. The Christian should become a good citizen of the state so as to live all false charges down.

## **SETTING ASIDE FREEDOMS (2:16)**

### **“Act as free men”**

How could these Christians be free? Many were slaves and all were under the political yoke of the tyrant Nero. They were free internally, not externally, for they had been set free from the dominance and power of sin and Satan. They were, in the eyes of God, free men because they were part of the great spiritual nation chosen by God, that is, the Church (2:9). These Christians were free people and really had to subject themselves only to God.

When a man knows he is free internally from sin’s dominion and that the forces of hell can no longer captivate him, this gives a strong motivation for one to reach out for external (social and political) liberty. Christians are free in the highest sense and that spiritual liberty is an invaluable blessing. Christians are free indeed. *“. . . and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. . . If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:32, 36).*

Even though they may have been slaves, or placed under the political yoke of Rome, these Asian Christians were freemen. This is why Christianity has always been the friend and promoter of political and social liberty. Its influence emancipated the slaves throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity has always taken the side of the poor,

the aged, the weak, the helpless and the oppressed. Most of the civil freedoms which the world enjoy today, can be traced to the influence of Christianity.

**“and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil”**

The Christian has spiritual freedom and is a freeman in God’s sight, but he does not always use or demand his political and social freedoms because he has a higher end in view. Surely as this verse says, we are never to use our freedoms to further evil or to camouflage evil. The Christian is not to be a political reactionary, even though he has freedom in Christ. The Christian should never give opportunity, by his actions or words, for someone to speak evilly of him. He is never to abuse his spiritual and political freedoms.

It is interesting that, in the New Testament, Christians are not presented as social reformers, but they were in subjection to the government and to institutions, such as slavery, under which they found themselves, regardless of whether they were right or wrong. We never have Jesus or the Apostles telling Christians, “Rise up, shake off your bondage, cry out against injustices and demand your civil rights!”

The first century Christians were freemen in Christ but they set aside their freedoms for the higher good of reaching men and women for Christ. However, as men and women trusted Christ as their Savior and Lord, many social liberties came along with the spread of the gospel because the gospel truly produces freemen and freewomen.

**“but use it as bondslaves of God.”**

Christians are free, but they are also slaves of God. There are ever so many humanists today who believe freedom is the casting off of all moral restraints, but these people actually become the slaves of their own evil passions. They are in slavery to sin which has complete control over them. Yet, Christians are freemen spiritually. It is only as we are slaves to Christ that we are really free. God saved us in Christ; He did not set us free to do as we please, but to do what pleases God. As Christians we must remember that we are free-slaves, slaves to Christ who set us free to serve God.

**SENSIBLE COMMANDS (2: 17)**

**“Honor all men”**

Literally this says, “Keep honoring all men as a fact of life. This is to be a settled state of mind, whether those being honored deserve it or not. Christians do have a general relationship and responsibility to all men. We are to value and respect all men because they are creatures of God made in His image. We do not have to agree with all men, but we must respect their persons, rank, office and ideas.

All people are to be honored, and if we must disagree with people, then let it be done respectfully.

### **“love the brotherhood”**

While all men should be treated with respect, we Christians should show a peculiar affection and care for those who are one with us in Christ. We are to love all Christians continually as a testimony to the world.

*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John . 13:34-35).*

### **“fear God”**

Christians are to have a reverential awe toward God. In one respect, Christianity springs out of a fear of God, but in another sense it springs out of the love of God. This kind of fear is not fear of punishment but of disapproval, not so much the dread of suffering, but the dread of doing wrong.

As Christians we are to reverence God, put Him in the center of all things. We are to give God the honor due His name because He is the sovereign Lord in the moral order of the universe.

### **“honor the king”**

Now Peter comes back to his original thoughts on government. This is the punch line, for he wants to drive home a point. Those who love the brotherhood and fear God also honor the king. They were to respect the emperor who was Nero, the most monstrous ruler the world has ever known. He probably was responsible for more murders than any other man in history, including Hitler. He was a cruel, vicious, amoral, insane tyrant. Yet, Peter told these Christians to honor the emperor. They had every right to be filled with bitterness, resentment and hostility toward the Roman government, and Nero in particular, because they were being persecuted, but God said they were to honor the king.

## **CONCLUSION**

If you are not a Christian, there is good news for you. You can be set free by believing that Christ died for your sins and that He rose to be your Lord. He will set you free to serve God even though your external circumstances may seem oppressive. Do you want to be a free person? Trust Christ who said, *“You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”* He also said, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6)..*