

This Exiled Life – Part 2

Honor God Through Earthly Authority

1 Peter 2:13-20

Mark Vroegop

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. 15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. 16 Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. 17 Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. 18 Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. 19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 1 Peter 2:13–20 (ESV)

If you were to place a hidden microphone in a classroom or on a playground with children interacting, it would not be long until you heard one of two very familiar statements: "You are not my boss!" or "That's not fair!" Just think of how many times you made those statements growing up.

Some kid in the classroom, or perhaps a sibling, attempted to tell you what to do, give you a directive, or provide correction. Before you knew it – almost in a knee-jerk response – you blurted out "You can't tell me what to do! You are not the teacher. You're not my parents." Even if they were right, it was an easy place to go. If you are a parent, think of how often you've had to settle an argument that began with protest: "That's not fair! I'm telling."

Do you know what the challenge is with those statements? They don't completely end when you grow up. Oh, we change how we express it. No adult would think of saying "you're not my boss" to someone who is telling him or her what to do. But underneath every one of us, and no matter what your age, there is still that childlike response just waiting to emerge.

Do you know why that is? I think it is because the issue of authority and fairness are not childish issues; they are human issues. There is something fundamental to the brokenness of our humanity that creates pushback toward those in authority and toward treatment that doesn't seem fair. Somewhere lurking in the heart of every person, believer or non-believer, is this desire to not have others rule us or get more than us. Concerns about authority and fairness are part of the cultural air that we breathe.

So how does the gospel change that reality? How does being a Christian exile change how we think about and respond to authority and the issue of fairness? 1 Peter 2:13-20 takes up these questions by addressing the two categories or situations where authority and fairness surface most often.

The Government and Employer Test

How a person responds to the government and his or her employer is the most practical test for one's views on authority and fairness. Drop a microphone into a small group, lunch room, or dinner table, and I would suggest that the most common complaints related to authority and fairness would be somehow connected to the government and our bosses.

In 1 Peter 2, Peter is attempting help these exiles know how to live in light of who they are in Christ. He has argued that being a follower of Jesus means that you become exiles – Christian exiles - without ever changing locations. Being an exile has an effect on how you think about your identity, your future, how you treat one another inside the church, and how you wage war against sin. That is what the last few messages have been about.

We've heard about a heavenly inheritance, being a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation. But what if Christian exiles took that too far? You see, it is possible that an exile mindset wrongly applied could create some level of anarchy. If you have people who think about themselves as a nation within a nation and believe they have a heavenly inheritance, they might be inclined to resist any authority because they have pledged allegiance to another authority. They could think that they are above obedience, submission, or following the rules. Sort of like the relationship that can exist with a professional athlete and his coach.

You can imagine someone over applying Peter's teaching and saying something like, "Our king is Christ! We are God's nation. Rome is not our nation. Rome's laws do not apply to us." Or you could imagine someone saying, "I'm part of the priesthood. I don't have to take orders from my employer. I'm above all that." In this way, Christianity could be a threat to the stability of a nation, and there were rulers who thought that was the case.

This text helps us to see how being a Christian exile does not undermine culture, but rather how it serves to glorify God inside the culture. Being an exile does not make you a rebel; it makes you a respectful, convictional, servant-leader in the culture. The gospel creates Christian exiles who glorify God by how they respond to authority.

Allow me to show you how this works out in regards to an exile's relationship to government and an employer.

Government: Be obedient to every authority even if it is humanly designed

In verses 13-17, Peter addresses how exiles should respond to the government. How should exiles, citizens of a heavenly kingdom with a resurrected King, think and live while under the rule of earthly rulers?

The answer is: be subject to them. Other translations use the word "submission" here, but we need to know what that means. Now getting this definition right is important because it appears again in our text today in regards to servants in verse 18 and wives in 3:1. What's more, the word is used in a number of key places in the New Testament. A few notable examples:

- Jesus was submissive to His parents as He grew up (Luke 2:51)
- The disciples rejoiced that the demons submitted to them (Luke 10:17)
- Paul commands submission to the government because it possesses authority from God (Romans 13:1)
- Submission of the created order in the future is part of Christ's victory over the grave while He is also submissive to the Father's will (1 Corinthians 15:28)
- The church's relationship to Christ is characterized by submission (Ephesians 5:24)
- Believers are commanded to be submissive to one another (Ephesians 5:21)

The meaning of the word "subject" or "submission" in the original language is a willing obedience. The word involves an attitude which is marked by respect and honor, and actions that fit with that heart-orientation. This is in contrast to passive aggressive behavior where one appears compliant, but is internally resistant or begrudging compliance, or where one follows but with a negative or complaining spirit. To be subject or to be submissive means that you have an attitude whose bent is not toward resistance but toward respect, not toward rebellion but obedience, and not toward complaining but joyfully doing what is asked of you.

It is very clear that this word has broad implications for believers in many different categories, relationships, and contexts. A believer's life and relationships are to be marked by the spirit and actions of submission – a willing obedience toward others.

Now some of you are immediately asking, "Are there any exceptions?" And there certainly are times when submission is set aside by a greater command to follow Christ or God's laws. This command does not rule out civil disobedience or a concern for justice when authority is abused. But this text is very clear that believers are to have a disposition or bias toward respectful submission when it comes to authority. The normative posture of a Christian exile is to have a life marked by willing obedience.

This is a good place for each of us to take a little bit of personal inventory before we get too far into this text. When it comes to authority figures or institutions in your life do you have a posture toward submission or toward resistance? Do you create a spirit of joyful obedience around you? Or are you constantly in the center of controversy and protest? I've seen this play out in families and teams. When a parent or leader has a problem with authority – a chip on their shoulder of resistance – it spreads and affects everyone. So as you come to this text, is your heart in a place where it loves the sound of willing obedience with some exceptions? Or are you in a posture of "Prove to me that I need to obey and that they deserve my compliance."

The reason for this willing obedience is theological. Verse 13 says "be subject for the Lord's sake." Peter connects their exile posture *not* to the worthiness of the person or even whether or not they agree with what they are being asked to do. He connects it to their view of God. Since God establishes all authority (Romans 13:1-3) and since their good behavior says something about God (1 Peter 2:12), they need to pursue willing obedience with God in view. What you think of God affects what you think about the government.

What follows in verse 13 is a very specific application: to every human institution. An exile might overstep by creating a separation between obeying God and obeying anything created by a human being – like laws or governmental systems. So I think the focus of verse 13 is on the contrast between “for the Lord’s sake” and “human.” How you respond to authority says something about what you think about God and the gospel.

But how far does this application go? Interestingly, Peter qualifies this with the broadest possible categories. He starts with the emperor, but extends it to the governors who exist on a local level to maintain the public order. Keep in mind that the ruler in Rome at the time was Nero, who was no friend of Christianity nor a model human being. His thirty-year reign was known for all kinds of debauchery, ordered executions, financial mismanagement, and a campaign of Christian persecution after a massive fire in Rome which some suggest that Nero started to make room for a building campaign. It is also believed that Nero ordered the execution of Peter between 64-68 AD.

What’s more, the style of Roman dominance was to add some kind of emperor worship or honor into the various cultures that Rome occupied. In some provinces there was more pressure than others, and some provincial governors were more corrupt than others. In many respects, our model of government, even with all its shortcomings, is worlds apart from Rome and the surrounding regions. If Peter gave this command in the first century and in that context, it certainly has application today.

God desires for respectful obedience to be given to those who do not deserve it, and verse 15 tells us why. It is God’s will (again a reference to a theological viewpoint) that living righteously will send a strong message to those who do not believe. Their good actions will silence those who make charges against them. Peter anticipates that false charges will be brought in opposition to Christianity. His hope is that their consistent godly actions will serve as a buffer against the onslaught of unfair accusations.

Their freedom in Christ, therefore, should be used powerfully. Verse 16 is a strong encouragement to *not* doubt their freedom, but to be sure that they use it appropriately. It should not be used as a cover-up for evil – like disrespect, violence, or anarchist ideology. While it is true that their king is Christ, they should act like Christ as they live under an earthly, sinful king with humanly created institutions. Christianity should not be used as a cloak for an authority problem or a rebellious heart.

Instead, they should honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, and honor the emperor. Their attitude and disposition should be one of willful obedience. When the government asks for obedience, whether it is from the emperor or your HOA, your bias should be “Yes, of course.”

Let me remind you that there are exceptions to this rule. The government has a God-given responsibility to carry out justice in a way that is right and fair. There are times when man-made laws could and should be disobeyed. There are times when government or governors overstep their God-given authority. This text is not advocating mindless obedience.

In fact, you should work in the public square to create the kind of justice and equity that God desires. If you have the opportunity to influence some human institution with biblical principles for the good of humanity, by all means do so! And if there are injustices that need to be addressed, then work to make

those changes. We should “seek justice and correct oppression” (Isaiah 1:17) or speak in protest to those in power when they are wrong as Nathan did to David in 2 Samuel 12.

But this text forbids the kind of attitude and actions that do not fit with the model of Christlikeness. To be a follower of Jesus means that your king is Jesus, but living that out doesn’t mean creating social chaos. Rather, it means responding in a manner that seeks to honor God by how we honor authority.

Our normative posture in the Christian life is to glorify God by submission and willing obedience, even to institutions created and occupied by imperfect human beings. Christians are called to honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, and honor the emperor.

Do you realize how different this kind of attitude will make you in the world? Talk about being an exile! Listen, anyone can complain about their boss, be disrespectful to a police officer, talk negatively about the IRS, or be condescending about someone in political office. But imagine the message that is communicated when people whose king is Jesus act like Jesus in how they deal with authority.

Work: Be obedient to every employer even to those who are unfair

The second application that Peter makes of this principle of willing obedience relates to employer/employee relationships. In the same way that Christian exiles are to be subject or submissive to humanly created institutions, so too are we to be subject to those to whom we report.

Before we unpack this verse, let me just address something related to the use of the word “servant” here. Other translations translate this word as “slaves,” and you might think that the Bible is advocating or sanctioning the kind of chattel slavery that was a part of our nation’s history. The word here means household servant, and during the writing of 1 Peter slavery was quite different than the slavery in our nation’s background. Servants were normally paid by their masters, there were Roman laws governing the treatment of slaves, and many of them were managers and skilled professionals like doctors, teachers, and artisans.¹

However, they were not slaves voluntarily. Their family background was likely somehow related to a financial crisis where their family sold themselves into slavery, or their family may have been captured in a battle. Additionally, “their legal status, social standing, and opportunity for economic independence were clearly lower than others in Roman society.”² So I don’t want to make light of their situation, however it was not the same as slavery in the United States. That said, it certainly was not fair nor right.

Now our text does not speak into the totality of this reality with the institution of slavery at any level, but it does speak into one’s attitude regarding being treated unfairly. That said, the Bible is not condoning sinful, immoral, or inhumane treatment. Here’s what I would say to a person stuck in a culture where slavery was still active: “Be respectful and honorable. And do whatever you can to get your freedom. Pray for it. Buy it. Advocate for it. And if you can, work to change unjust laws.” This was

¹ Wayne Grudem, 1 Peter – Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 124.

² Ibid.

the brilliance of the non-violent protest movement of the Civil Rights Era – challenge the conscience of the nation by your willingness to suffer. Hopefully that helps you understand what this text is not saying or advocating.

I think that the clearest application for our present cultural dynamic is that of an employer and an employee. And once again, Peter is pressing against our natural tendency to be willingly obedient to those who are fair, kind, and reasonable. Certainly we should follow those kind of people. And, let me say, if you are a Christian boss, you should strive to model Christlikeness in how you treat your employees. You should not be domineering and lord your authority over others (Matt. 20:25). Nor should you ever forget that you have a Master in heaven (Col. 4:1). You should strive to be a model servant-leader.

If you are an employee, this text clearly says that you have a responsibility to be willingly obedient to your “master,” even if he or she is not good, not gentle, and unjust. Being obedient to those who we respect and to those who treat us well is one thing. But it would be easy to justify not obeying or not complying because of the unfairness how you are treated.

Human beings are not normally inclined to willingly submit to those who are not gentle and not just. That is Peter’s point entirely. In doing so, the Christian exile looks beyond the boss and acts this way out of service to Christ.

This is why verse 19 talks about being “mindful of God” and that this kind of action is “a gracious thing” or “this is commendable” (NIV). The willing obedience to a less than kind boss is done with a view toward glorifying and honoring God.

Interestingly, Peter also says in verse 20 that if you sin and are punished for it, that is not suffering as a Christian exile. Doing a poor job at work and getting a bad performance review is not suffering as an exile. Getting a speeding ticket because you are driving too fast is not facing persecution. Or being treated sternly because you refuse to listen and do what is asked of you is not living out your exile. At that moment you don’t need endurance, you need repentance. You don’t need a lawyer; you probably need some humility.

Now let me say again that this doesn’t mean that you can never make an appeal to your boss, talk to the HR department, or even become a “whistle-blower.” If you are asked to do something unethical, illegal, or something that violates your conscience, you have an equal responsibility to do what is right. But as you make your way through that process, you need to carefully think through what it looks like to do it in a way that fits with being a Christian exile.

Peter is not dealing with all the possibilities that may develop as exiles live in their culture. However, he is trying to help them understand a very important philosophy of how Christians are to live. The second half of verse 20 is a good summary of the heart of this text:

But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 1
Peter 2:20 (ESV)

In other words, the model for living as an exile is doing what is good while realizing that some degree of suffering is to be expected. We'll look more at how to endure next week. But for today I just want you to see that the normative pattern for the believer is doing what is good and right while enduring unfair treatment because of what we think about God.

Personal Inventory

I've made a few applications already throughout this message, but let me give you a few more to consider. I've organized them into some important categories.

Theological. Is your view of God and your love for Christ developed enough that it informs how you think about areas as practically as the government? Do you build a wall between what we talk about on Sunday and how you watch the news, read the newspaper, or how you respond to your employee meeting at work? Have you allowed worldly and self-centered thinking to begin to dominate your mind and even your heart? Do you see the role that Christians are supposed to have in our culture?

Attitude. Is your normative pattern one of willing obedience? Or is your attitude more like a person a friend mine calls "CAVE dwellers" – consistently against virtually everything. Are you someone who people have to develop plans to "work around?" Do you pray for those in government? Do you talk about them in respectful and honoring ways? Have you joined in office gossip and company complaining? Do you have a chip on your shoulder as it relates to "leadership?"

Actions. I would not be surprised if there was some who are under conviction today, and you are realizing that your attitude and your actions need to change. You may need to ask someone's forgiveness at work, or let your boss know that you've had a really bad attitude lately. It probably won't surprise her. Do you consistently find ways to do what is right, to live honorably, to walk in humility? If I run into someone at your workplace and I tell them that I'm your pastor, will they be excited to meet me, or will they be surprised and uncomfortable?

Our culture is dominated by self-centeredness, back-stabbing, a lack of concern for others, and deep divisions. The rancor is getting louder. Anarchy is in air. And now, more than ever, we need Christian exiles who know how to think, respond, and pray in the context of our relationships with the government and with our employers. In these two critical and common areas, we have a great opportunity to let the light of the gospel shine.

Instead of being childish with heart attitudes like "You are not my boss" or "That's not fair," I'm calling you to the kind of people whose bias is toward obedience – to be the kind of people who know that Jesus is their King and that work should be done for God's glory.

And out of the understanding, they can "...honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor ... and be subject to your masters."

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