

GOD'S FREE SERVANTS (1/2)

An Exposition of 1 Peter 2.13-17

First Peter 2.13-17 contains a paradox, not a contradiction. A paradox is a statement that only seems self-contradictory but is in fact true. A contradiction is a statement of things that cannot be and not be at the same time in the same respect. Our text today exhorts Christians to live as God's free servants. That's the paradox right there. By God's grace, we are free. We have liberty, the highest liberty of all. And yet at the same time we are servants, duty-bound to live in the manner prescribed for us, and to conform precisely and exactly to that standard of our Master who bought us, owns us, and commands us.

This paradox is most concisely stated here in verse 16, "use your liberty as the servants of God," Peter says. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer from the Anglican church has many beautiful prayers in it. One of them says that God's "service is perfect freedom" ("The Second Collect, for Peace"). Conversely, there is no slavery like following your own foolish heart, chained to your lies and your lusts, as all non-Christians are. What the world counts liberty is the most cruel bondage to the devil.

Martin Luther understood this paradox well. In 1520, the same year the Roman Catholic Church threatened to excommunicate him, he wrote a tract called "On the Freedom of a Christian" explaining this paradox. Summarizing his entire tract, Luther wrote, "a Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all." Someone explained it this way:

Luther's paradoxical teaching of Christian freedom, following Christ and St. Paul, joins lord and servant in one person. By faith alone, God sets a man utterly, completely, free in Christ. He is lord of all, subject to none. Love binds him as an utterly dutiful servant to the neighbor, subject to everyone. The paradox of Christian freedom then plays out in faith and love (Rev. Travis Loeslie at lutheranreformation.org, accessed Mar 2024).

We might add, Luther was following St. Peter also, for Peter and Paul both faithfully taught Christ's doctrine, who Himself is the truth. Jesus Christ is supremely the Lord of all, and yet He made Himself the Servant of all. And Christ is the supreme example that Christians all imitate. Anyone not following Christ's example is not to be counted a Christian, their self-identification notwithstanding.

Hear, then, the portion of God's Word that is the basis for this sermon, 1 Peter 2.13-17.

13 Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether *it* be to the king, as supreme; ¹⁴ or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. ¹⁵ For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: ¹⁶ as free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. ¹⁷ Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

Amen. The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Stating the doctrine of our text as one, comprehensive rule, it says,

Live as God's free servants, submitting yourselves to others with the liberty of doing God's will.

The passage neatly divides into two parts, each associated with an exhortation. First, "submit yourselves" (v. 13), and second, "[live or act, implied] as free" (v. 16). The first has to do with submitting yourselves to human authorities; the second, with living as those free to serve God. And

each of these two major sections has three clear parts that elaborate their main ideas. Let me show them to you now.

- I. Submit Yourselves to Human Authorities (vv. 13-15). This first part begins with a sweeping exhortation in verse 13, and then gives specific examples where that exhortation can be applied in the rest of verse 13 and verse 14, and then explains the spiritual reason why all these are good things to do in verse 15.

Sweeping exhortation (v. 13a). “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.” The exhortation is made to all of us, “yourselves” being a plural pronoun, translating a plural verb that means, “be in subjection.” There is an untranslated conjunction in the original that could be translated “therefore” which links this thought to the preceding text. There Peter had been writing about how important it is for Christians to abstain from fleshly lusts and to practice good works, because even though unbelievers will speak evil of you now for leading a holy life, they will glorify God by their speechlessness on Judgment Day when the whole truth comes out for all to see. I mean the truth that you truly belong to Christ, and that you are righteous in Christ, and that you led righteous lives while you served Christ on earth. Another aspect of the truth that will come out publicly on Judgment Day is that those critical unbelievers were horribly in the wrong to slander and persecute you as they did, and that they truly deserve the eternal punishment they will suffer.

Our submission or subjection has respect to “every ordinance of man,” a phrase that encompasses the requirements and restrictions of human government. There were then and still are today countless laws of earthly governments that prohibit criminal activities, enjoin civic behavior, regulate human life in various ways, and levy taxes, for example. As Christians and as a church of Christians, we are here called to be what might be called “law-abiding citizens” in the kingdom of man, not outlaws, scofflaws, ruffians, or ne’er-do-wells. Individual Christians must submit ourselves to man’s ordinances, and the church as an institution is properly to subject itself to the law as well.

Now this call to submission chafes upon our necks so much on account of our pride and willfulness that we can barely stand to hear it. We live in a particular cultural moment that has very little appreciation for the goodness and the wisdom of this counsel. It wouldn’t surprise me if already you are thinking about whether there are any exceptions to the rule. Hold on a second. Wouldn’t it be best, first, to examine ourselves with respect to this holy exhortation to submit ourselves to every ordinance of man? Do I respect these human authorities as I should, and as much as I should? Do I recognize that it is God’s will for me to do that, and that any failure is not only resisting the human authority but also God Himself? Do I submit myself to the ordinance of speed limits when I drive, and do I fill out an honest tax form so that whatever is required of me I actually pay? It’s that time of year, you know.

Only after such sober self-examination and heartfelt confession of sin would it be reasonable to ask whether there is an exception to this biblical counsel for principled civil disobedience, and whether the so-called “separation of church and state” exempts the church from being subject to man’s laws, and related matters. Admittedly, these issues raise complex and vexing ethical questions, but it would be far from Peter’s point here to digress. Let it suffice to say that, in the light of other biblical passages, this call to submission does not involve absolute and unqualified submission to any and all human whims that might be imposed upon you with a show of authority, as if the state were God rather than merely a servant of God under His authority. But that is all we have time to say about this right now.

While a fuller explanation comes in verse 15 about why spiritually this submission is a good thing to do, a hint of that explanation is right here in verse 13. We Christians voluntarily submit “for the Lord’s sake,” specifically, for Jesus’ sake. It is because Jesus exhorts us through His servant Peter, and because Jesus exemplified this virtue in His own life on earth, that we Christians are committed to

obey Jesus and follow His example. Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, so submitted to human authorities as being counseled here. That is the most magnificent example of the paradox of being God's free Servant, and the prototype for this practical righteousness in us His followers. One incident from the gospels especially illustrates this so well. It is found in Matthew 17.24-27:

²⁴ When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, "Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?" ²⁵ He said, "Yes." And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" ²⁶ Peter said to Him, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. ²⁷ Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you" (NKJV).

Jesus implies that the sons of God, the greatest King, are actually free from paying taxes, but that they should pay them anyway to avoid offending the authorities who levy them. And in the most wonderful way, Jesus Himself paid the tax for Himself and Peter with a piece of money to be found in the first fish's mouth caught by Peter!

That same Peter is the one who wrote this epistle. Not content with a generality, Peter continues his pastoral direction by giving specific examples where the principle of submission to human authorities can be applied.

Specific examples (vv. 13b-14). Those specific examples include "whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him." In other words, be subject to both levels of government, the king at the top and his deputies under his authority. To reinforce the reasonableness of this counsel of submission to all of them, Peter describes their legitimate ministry in human government. The "governors" are "sent by" the king "for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well." Good human government, as God designed it for social order, peace, and justice, fulfills this purpose of punishing society's criminals and praising its good citizens who are upright and contribute to the common good. Now no human government perfectly realizes these ideals—not the Roman government in Peter's day, nor certainly the United States' government in ours. But there remains a moral responsibility for us to be in subjection to governments where there is a modicum of nobility such as Peter here describes.

But what if the King is an utter tyrant, a narcissistic person who does nothing but abuse his subjects and insists on being worshipped as if he were God? Some of the best Christian thinkers in our history have pondered this deeply and concluded that even then, private revolution is not an ethical option. But a public revolution of the governors under the king, known as "lesser magistrates," would be justified. Calvin and the Reformers taught this, along with many others of that theological persuasion. But Peter is not here writing specifically to the governors whom he mentions, but to ordinary Christians under the authority of the king and his governors.

Having given specific examples of how to apply his sweeping exhortation, Peter proceeds with a further spiritual explanation in verse 15.

Spiritual explanation (v. 15). This statement is packed with so much truth. The word "for" here is a "marker of explanatory causes," equivalent to the English phrase, "in order that," or, more simply, "because." There are good reasons behind the exhortation. It is not arbitrary. This implies that there will be good consequences to you from heeding it and misery to be suffered from rejecting it.

In general, you must realize that this is "the will of God" for you. Here is the first appearance of that expression in 1 Peter, and here it designates your moral duty. It is used with the same sense in 1

Peter 4.2 where we read that a godly man should “no longer live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God.” You see, “the will of God” is opposed to the “lusts” or sinful desires “of men.” In the verse that follows, this is called “the will of the Gentiles,” that is, what it is that wicked people prefer to do and would have us do, which is, in a word, sin, the worst thing in the world. Sin is the greatest evil, the thing to be avoided more than anything else, hands down.

Peter uses the phrase, “the will of God,” in another place to mean divine Providence. “It is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing” (1 Pet 3.17). There it is God’s will proper, what God Himself is pleased to do. But here, “the will of God” is being used figuratively for His command which is, therefore, your moral duty.

By appealing to “the will of God” as a reason for submitting to human authorities, Peter not only presents an iron-clad argument—for God is above all—but also a consideration that real Christians find irresistible. Those who have saving faith want nothing more, deep down, than to do God’s will, to please Him above all things. That is because He has given us a living faith which produces good works, obedience to His will. He has also given us a genuine repentance from our former idolatry to serve the living and true God (1 Thess 1.9). We are not always consistent with this sincere desire to please God, because otherwise we would never commit any sin whatsoever. But we truly do crave in our hearts to please God, and this results in genuine obedience to commandments, His revealed will.

Once I sat across from a professing Christian who asked me whether he should worship on Sunday with the church instead of attending a family member’s birthday party, because there was a schedule conflict and he had to choose. I asked him, “Which do you think would please God?” I’ll never forget his reply. “I don’t care about that,” he said, or something equivalent. I was flummoxed. Looking back, I might have said, “Well, then, do as you please and go to hell when you’re done.” I didn’t say that, but it’s the truth. If you have no heart to please God and to do His will, how can you imagine that you are born again and in a state of grace, dear friends?

Peter proceeds to explain what doing God’s will in this matter will accomplish practically, and this reveals something of God’s wisdom in giving us the exhortation to be subject to human authorities. He says, “For so is the will of God, that with well doing [here, being subject to human ordinances] ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (v. 15). “Foolish men” refers to unbelievers observing your conduct, whether you are subject to human authorities or not. Their “ignorance” is obvious from what they say. The words translated “foolish” and “ignorance” are similar. They describe a lack of good sense and a lack of spiritual discernment. People may be highly educated in worldly learning and yet fools, never students in the school of Jesus Christ. And even though these sinners are spiritually ignorant, they are not silent. Oh, they talk about what annoys them about Christians and the church of Christ. They find fault with us, not just mentioning our actual faults, and we have many, but they get more stirred up by our virtues and virtuous behavior. Remember what Peter had just written about them: “they speak evil of you [Christians] as evildoers” (v. 12). That is what sin and unbelief do to people. It makes them perverse in their assessments. They call good evil and evil good (Isa 5.20). They disparage true righteousness but take pleasure in sin and others who sin along with them (Rom 1.32).

Well, then, how will our obedience to God’s will silence them, as Peter says? If God is gracious to the unconverted in this life, He brings them to their senses and, realizing they have horribly slandered the innocent, they become ashamed of themselves, believe the gospel, and join the church. This happened for example with Rosaria Butterfield, a university professor and a so-called lesbian who decided to investigate a group of Christians and their meetings and found her heart turned to God and the Christian faith in the process. She calls it her “train wreck conversion.” She remembers her attitude before that, and I quote, “Stupid. Pointless. Menacing. That’s what I thought of Christians and their god Jesus, who in paintings looked as powerful as a Breck Shampoo commercial model.” But a

pastor named Ken Smith with his sweet congregation got through to her with their humble love that aimed, patiently, to help her out of her spiritual and moral confusion. Now the former ignorance of foolish Rosaria before her conversion has been silenced, and instead, she is praising her Savior the Lord Jesus Christ and pointing millions of others like her to Him. Praise God! By the way, she left her girlfriend and is now a man's wife and a mother to four children.

That's one way Christian godliness silences foolish people. But the other way will be at Judgment Day. When the Lord Jesus Christ commends the good works of Christians publicly, in front of all the reprobate sinners on their way to the lake of fire, they will become utterly speechless in their conviction and terror. In that way, your having done God's will shall put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. Christ will be glorified, and we will be glorified with Him.

So brethren, submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake. As American citizens, submit to the laws of the federal, state, and local government. Excel as a law-abiding person. Do this because it is God's will, it is another opportunity for well doing instead of evil doing, and it will silence the non-Christians, one way or another.

We have to leave the exposition of the rest of this passage to another time. Until then, may God help us to understand and apply what we've heard. Amen.