

The Pilgrim's Calling to Submit to Civil Authority

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Sermons on 1 Peter

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Bible Text: 1 Peter 2:13-17; Romans 13

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We read this evening from the word of God in Paul's epistle to the Romans, chapter 13.

1 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. 2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. 5 Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. 6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. 7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

Thus far we read from Romans 13. Our text is found in 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.

By the way, you notice that that word "men" there is in italics and that means that that was added by the translators. So the text really reads, "Honour all," and the idea is all the magistrates, not all men in the world but the magistrates.

Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

That's our text. Loving in the Lord Jesus Christ, an entirely new section of the epistle of Peter begins with these verses. Well, really in a general way, the verses we considered last time in verses 11 and 12, but here specifically the Apostle Peter begins to call our attention to how we are to conduct ourselves as pilgrims and strangers in the earth in all the relationships of life, and he deals with all of them, all the relationships in which we carry on the years of our pilgrimage, of our relationship to civil government; our relationship to our employer; our relationships in the family, husbands to their wives and wives to their husbands, and parents to their children; relationships in which we live to the world too. The apostle discusses that at great length, especially from the viewpoint of the fact that the relationships in which we live to the world are almost always involving us in persecution and therefore the apostle instructs us in how we must live as pilgrims and strangers when we are persecuted.

Tonight, we consider our relationship to magistrates. It was important in Peter's day that the apostle direct the attention of the saints in Asia Minor to this calling, and the admonition of the text is made considerably more forceful by the fact that the magistrates were those rulers in the Roman Empire who ruled the world tyrannically, dictatorially, and that it was the policy of the Roman Empire, beginning with Nero, to persecute the saints. And the apostle recognizes the fact that for those who are called to be pilgrims and strangers in the earth, they might not recognize correctly what their calling was anymore than the church today recognizes what its calling is. And so this is of extraordinary importance. It was for the church in Asia Minor in those days in which this epistle was written but it is also of extreme importance for us. Sad to say but nevertheless true, the church, I mean, broadly speaking, the church is not at all united on this commandment of Christ and the church, the conservative church, the Right Wing movement in our country, will have none of this and consider this, in fact, obedience to this text be a kind of a dereliction of duty and of evidence of being unpatriotic.

So we must hear this, beloved, we must hear what God requires of us as pilgrims in the earth. Is it true that because we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and that we acknowledge Christ as King and that our obedience and loyalty is to Christ who rules in the church to the exclusion of earthly magistrates? May we conclude as some in the history of the church have concluded that because we serve the living Christ exalted in the highest heavens and bow in worship before him, we are free from obligations to the magistrates? The Bible tells us in more than one place, don't ever come to that conclusion. We must submit to those in authority.

So I call your attention to this passage under the theme: submission to civil authority. The pilgrim's, we could have that as our theme, "The Pilgrim's Calling to Submit to Civil Authority." What it is and how he is to do that, I refer particularly in the second point to that text, "As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God." Slaves, you could read that, "as the slaves of God." That's the manner. And then finally, the purpose and that's defined in verse 15, "For so is the will of God, that with well doing," that is, with submitting, "ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." That's an interesting statement and we will have to consider that together in the third point.

When the apostle is defining our calling as pilgrims and strangers in the earth as being one of submission, he refers specifically, as Paul does in Romans 13, to the secular civil magistrate. Not to the rulers in the church, not to those in authority in the shop, the secular magistrate. In Peter's day, the emperor of the Roman Empire and all his governors in the provinces throughout the whole known world and all the officials of government by whom the empire operated, by whose authority the empire operated. In our day, it would refer to our President and our Legislature, our national Legislature, and our Supreme Court, and the governors of the states, and the mayors of the cities and villages, and the entire civil bureaucracy which insists on obedience to the laws that are adopted, and the policemen who enforce the laws. All are included. We can't be picky about what legislators or what government officials we are going to submit to. All are included. We are under authority as citizens of the country, we are under the authority of the magistrates.

Now the apostle indicates in the text that these magistrates have a calling and that calling is defined as "the punishment of evildoers, and the praise of them that do well." That's the calling of the magistrate. That's why Christ put him in office, that he might enforce those demands of Christ. Most of the time, there is only a general sort of a way in which the magistrates do that, that is, actually punish evildoers and praise them that do well. The canon, the criterion for well-doing and evildoing is, of course, the Bible where God reveals his moral will for mankind, particularly in the 10 Commandments, and it is the calling of the magistrate to punish evildoers who violate the law of God and to praise well-doers who keep the law of God. That's the calling of magistrates. In the civil sphere, the government may not come into the church and insist on punishing evildoers in the church; that's the church's business. It mayn't praise well-doers in the church, that's the church's business. In the state, in the civil realm, that's where the government operates and that's where it has its authority and its right to rule.

Now authority means in scripture the God-given right to determine for others what is according to the will of God and what is opposed to it. Those in authority have to do that. That's true in all parts of life, elders, parents, employers and all the rest. But they not only have the right to determine what is right and what is wrong but they must do so according to the will of God, and authority means that they have the right to punish those who don't adhere to the laws which they have passed, and they have the right to bless and praise those who obey. That's their call as authority.

They receive that authority from Christ. We all know and we confess that Christ at the time of his exaltation was given universal authority over everyone, over devils even, over angels in heaven, and over every single man, woman and child that lives. Christ was given that authority. He was made King of kings and Lord of lords. He rules sovereignly in the world. Do you know why these precepts of the word of God are so little kept in our day? Because nobody believes in the sovereignty of Christ anymore, that's the problem. And if you deny the sovereignty of Christ, none of this makes any sense. "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake," and the reference is to Christ.

So that means, as far as we are concerned tonight, that Christ exercises his sovereign rule over everybody but also over us, pilgrims and strangers in the earth, through the magistrate. They're not freed from the authority of the magistrate because we are pilgrims in the earth. We're not and we may not walk as such. We are in submission to them for Christ's sake, for the Lord's sake, because the Lord has put them in office and the Lord rules over all through them sovereignly. You say, "Yes, but most of the time magistrates are wicked." That's true. That's true. There are very very few times in the history of the world when a country enjoyed a genuinely Christian magistrate, can almost count them on one hand. Maybe in England for a little while when Prince William from the Netherlands ruled in the British Isles. Maybe. He was a Calvinist. And maybe in the Netherlands once in a while and in Geneva, surely, where for a while the city council was composed of faithful godly members of the church. But it doesn't happen often and that's because of the fact that the church, after all, is very small and never has the power to gain positions of authority in the state. And if sometimes a so-called Christian does gain a position of authority in the state, he's corrupted because politics is a tremendous power of corruption and that's because of the fact that the magistracy from the beginning of the world until today in every nation under the sun, is the development of not the kingdom of Christ but the kingdom of antichrist.

That was the image of Nebuchadnezzar, wasn't it, with the head of gold, and the breast of silver, and the abdomen and loins of brass, and so on, legs of iron? The development of the antichrist. That development of the antichrist as it develops among the governments of the world is the most powerful force in the world for the development of antichrist. Read Revelation 13 where the beast that rose out of the sea is the political, the universal political power of antichrist. You say, "The false church has influence too?" It does indeed, as the antichrist develops throughout history, but the false church forges an alliance with the political world power. It does in our day too. All these evangelicals when they thought President Nixon was on their side flocked to the White House. They joined an unholy alliance with a political world power and they still do today.

And that's why in Revelation 13, the antichrist has also a religious and educational and scientific side to him, because he rules all of life. Religion too. Nevertheless, Christ is sovereign and not only does that mean that all these magistrates who are busily developing the kingdom of antichrist do so in spite of Christ's rule, they do so because of Christ's rule. Christ puts Nero on the throne of the Roman Empire as he put Nebuchadnezzar on the throne of Babylon, and as Daniel never ceased to remind the king. And Christ put Obama in the White House, President Obama. We may not have liked it in the last election and we may have cringed a bit when he was last week inaugurated into office, but Christ put him there and Christ never does anything willy-nilly, he never does anything without purpose, he never does anything just for the sake of doing it but it is necessary and important that antichrist develop under the rule of Christ because the wicked world in the midst of which we are pilgrims and strangers must be shown in all of its hatred and opposition of and to the cause of Christ. Wickedness has to abound. The cup of iniquity has to be filled.

Whether magistrates admit it or not, there is coming a day when every magistrate will stand before the throne of Christ and Christ will put this question to them, "Did you enforce my will, my moral will? Why not? Why not? Why didn't you? Why did you promote sin? Why as sin develops did the history of the world reach a point where the magistrate turns the whole business around and punishes those who do well and blesses those who sin? Why is that? Why did you do that?" They will have to answer to Christ for that. Nevertheless, that's under the sovereign rule of Christ. So Christ says to pilgrims and strangers, his people, "Because I have put those men into office, it is my will. I could have made the election different. Am I without power? I can set any man in office that I want. I put him there. Submit in your pilgrimage." Submit to antichrist? "Yes, to antichrist. Submit."

Now the text has different ways of defining that matter of submission and there are a couple, a few elements that I must call to your attention. That word "submit" appears again and again in the chapters that follow but the text makes clear what submission means. Notice the text does not use the word "obey" and that's very important that it doesn't use the word "obey." We must not always obey the magistrate if the magistrate demands of us that we do something contrary to the will of God, to the will of Christ. Then we say, "No, we won't do that." If the magistrate comes, as the day may very well come, when it says to our school societies, "You must hire homosexuals. You may not discriminate on the basis of sexual preference." And they're talking about that too. Don't think that's impossible. Then we say, "No." And if they say, "If you don't, we'll close your schools because you break the law," then we say, "We may not obey you because you are not requiring that which is according to the will of Christ but you are requiring us to do that which is contrary to the will of Christ."

When the three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stood before Nebuchadnezzar and he asked them, "Why don't you bow down to my image at the sound of the sackbut and psaltery and so on and so forth?" Then the three friends explained they couldn't do that because they worshiped God. And when Nebuchadnezzar said, "If you don't obey, I'll throw you in the fiery furnace, but I'll give you another chance, think it over and maybe you'll change your mind," and the three friends answered, "We don't need another chance. We're not going to bow down to your image. If it's the Lord's will that we die, we're still not going to bow down to your image. But our God can deliver us if he wants to, that's up to him but to obey you is unfaithfulness to Christ. We're not going to do it."

Daniel did the same thing when he faced the prospect of being thrown into the den of lions, and countless saints have faced the same fate, and always the answer of the pilgrim is, "We must obey God rather than men." But we still must submit. That's our calling. What does that mean, to submit without obeying? That means negatively that we don't, as the Right Wing would have it, organize resistance and parades and all kinds of demonstrations where people wave placards in the air. We don't do that. We don't try to overthrow the government. Perhaps many of you have read the writings of Francis Schaeffer, the well-know evangelical. Toward the end of his life, he wrote a book and in that book he said, "If our country continues on its downward spiral and becomes increasingly wicked, there will come a time when the church has to go to the mountains

and fight guerrilla warfare in opposition to the government. God says to you and to me, "No. No, Submit." If that means that you suffer persecution, submit. If that means that you are jailed, submit. Insist that you owe obedience to Christ but whatever the government is pleased to do with you in your refusal to obey, submit to it and tell the government, "We will do whatever you require of us that is not a demand to violate the law of God, and you may do to us what you will and we will still recognize that you have authority over us, but we will not obey."

That's the calling of the Christian. Almost nobody believes that, beloved. That's what Christ wants. We may not, as many people, church members, conservative church members, find refuge in the state of Idaho because, for some reason, that's a safer place to be if you don't want to pay your income tax. No. Rend to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. Pay your taxes. Pay your taxes if you think they're way too high. Pay your taxes no matter what. You may not refuse to pay your taxes. You must submit. You must obey if obedience does not lead you into conflict with Christ.

Then as if that's not enough, the apostle adds in verse 17, "Honour all," and then as if you have to rub it in, so to speak, again, "Honour the king," and honor him means, and here's where we so often fall short, I do anyway, show him respect, show him love, that is, love in the sense that you pray for him and that it is your earnest desire that he be converted and brought to faith in Christ. Give him the respect due to him. "To President Obama?" Yes. Yes. And that means that you may not speak evil of him, you may not say vile things about him, you may not say, for example, "I can hardly bear to look at his picture in the press or on television." You mayn't do that. You must honor him because in doing that, you honor Christ and you say of Christ, "Christ put him there and Christ has a good reason for doing it, and Christ wants him there because his presence there is the only way that Christ can accomplish the everlasting purpose of God, be it but in the way of the development of sin and impending judgments upon a world that fills the cup of iniquity." Honor him. You say, "But there isn't an honest man in the whole city of Washington. They're all corrupt to the marrow of their bones. They'll sell their wives for financial gain." Honor them. Christ put them there. And by doing that, honoring them, you honor Christ. You confess, "Thou art the Lord over all. Thou doest thy good pleasure. Thou dost accomplish the everlasting purpose of God. We don't understand but we honor thee as Lord of lords and King of kings." That's submission.

Now the apostle adds to that because he's very concerned about this whole matter and he's writing to those poor persecuted saints in Asia Minor, he says, "You must do this as free and not using your liberty for cloke of maliciousness but as the servants or slaves of God." That's how you must do it. There have always been in the history of the church, especially since the days of the Reformation, those pestiferous people who use their liberty as a cloak of maliciousness, that is, they use the liberty that they have in Christ as servants of Christ, slaves of Christ, the liberty that comes with obedience to the gospel, the liberty that is given to free sons who are at the same time, while sons, slaves of Christ, there have always been those who said, "My freedom in Christ gives me the right to disobey my government." In the days of the Reformation and shortly after the days of the Reformation, there were the Anabaptists, sometimes called the Right Wing of the

Reformation, and they were as great a threat to the Reformation as was the Roman Catholic Church. Their argument was, "Christ is our King. We belong to the kingdom of heaven. We'll set up the kingdom of heaven here on earth and we'll do that by separating ourselves from earthly powers and by refusing to obey those in authority over us." The more radical Anabaptists tried it too. Jan van Leiden, for example, he actually tried to establish the kingdom of Christ here on earth. And the Belgic Confession is written against that position because the Roman Catholic Church charged the Reformation with being traitors to constituted power because they identified the Reformation with these miserable Anabaptists. But they were a threat to the Reformation. Luther and Calvin did not take that position, especially not Calvin. When the French Huguenots in France were fighting for their very existence, Calvin said, "The people of God may not resort to the sword in defense of their position. He who fights with the sword perishes with the sword." That's what he said. They did it anyway. They didn't listen to Calvin but that was wrong.

Netherlands the same way. We may be ever so patriotic because of the fact that Dutch blood courses through the veins of most of us, but when they mixed the Reformation with the war against Spain, they sinned. You may say, "Yes, but the Spaniards were trying to force Roman Catholicism on them and they had a right to defend themselves against being forced into Roman Catholicism." No, they didn't. The end might have been a bloodbath in the Netherlands where Protestants were killed by the thousands. Maybe they were in spite of it all, I don't know, but they had no right to resort to arms, nor did they have that right in World War II when they established the underground, nor did our country in the Revolutionary War have a right to rise up in rebellion against constituted authority. Our country was born in revolution. No wonder that the fruit is that this country is constantly filled with revolution. We were born in revolution. All the talk was about liberty. "Liberty, liberty, liberty. Give me liberty or give me death!" But by liberty they didn't mean liberty in the gospel, liberty which means freedom from sin, they meant political liberty and the church doesn't fight for political liberty. The Civil War the same thing. You may have all the sympathy you want for the South, and there is a Christian historian who wrote a book of history of the Civil War from that point of view, and who interpreted the Civil War to be at bottom a religious war of New England Unitarians trying to impose their Unitarianism on Southern Calvinists. Well, I don't think that was it but whether it was or not, they had no right to secede from the Union and rise up in rebellion against the North. That was rebellion against constituted authority. You say that in our day and the whole church world will climb down your throat. But it's true, though. It's true.

Submit. What if it means the destruction of the church? Submit. What if it means persecution? Submit. There are no ifs about it. Submission is our calling and says Peter, "If you don't, you use the liberty that is yours in the gospel as a cloke of maliciousness, and that maliciousness is that you use your liberty in the gospel as an excuse not to submit to constituted authority." That's malicious and malicious is to be deliberately, consciously wicked, cause trouble, disturb what is right. That's going to be the case when antichrist sits on the throne. Christ rules over wicked magistrates so that the kingdom of antichrist may develop and that the world may fill the cup of iniquity. What's the calling

of the church? Is it any different from what the calling of those poor saints in Asia Minor was when Peter wrote this? They must have gasped when this letter came to them. Submit. Submit. Obey God rather than men but whatever may be the result, submit. You serve Christ and you show that you serve Christ and that you stand in the freedom of the gospel, the liberty of the gospel, not mere political liberty.

I recall hearing a speech once of, I don't know if you remember him, he's dead now, he was a leading Right Winger, Rousas Rushdoony, and really the spokesman for the whole Right Wing cause, and I used to correspond with him and we corresponded at great length. But he thought revolution was entirely permissible and that if the church became so strong that it could rise up against the government and overthrow it, as they did in Scotland in the days of the Covenanters, that was perfectly their right and, in fact, their obligation. And the Presbyterian church in Scotland taught the people that, staunch, solid, unbending Calvinists, Presbyterians, "If the king requires of us that we worship him, rise up in rebellion and overthrow the king and put a man in power who is favorable to the church."

That sort of a using of freedom for purposes of maliciousness has a long long history in the church, and almost always it's found among the conservative wing of the church. Liberals, they kowtow to antichrist just as soon as antichrist frowns. "Oh, what do you want us to do?" And they toady to antichrist. They're described in Revelation as the whore that rides the beast who drinks of the blood of the martyrs. They ally themselves with antichrist. Those who are pilgrims and strangers say, "No. Being citizens of Christ's kingdom and serving him as his slaves and having and enjoying the perfect liberty of the gospel means that we submit to all in authority and honor them regardless of the consequences. If we're persecuted, well, there's a special blessing awaiting them in heaven to those who love not their lives unto death."

Why does God want that that way? "By well-doing you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." Ignorance of foolish men. You understand, I hope, that ignorance here does not refer to a total lack of knowledge about anything spiritual, that wicked men don't know that there is a God and don't know that Christ is on the throne, and don't understand and know anything about that Christ is Lord of lords and King of kings. It is in that kind of ignorance. Everybody knows. Richard Dawkins in England who curses God and speaks of Christians as idiots, knows that Christ rules. They all know it. President Obama knows it too. He professes to be a Christian, even. But the ignorance of which the text speaks is the ignorance of foolishness and foolishness, as the Psalms teach us, deny God. "The fool hath said in his heart there is no God." He's a fool and he's a fool because although he knows better, even to the fact that he's going to have to answer someday for what he does to Christ, nevertheless denies him, curses his name, blasphemes him, kills the church, mocks the people of God, tries in every way possible to destroy Christianity.

That's the kind of age we live in. I read yet the other day that one man predicts, one atheist, so-called, there are no atheists except they be fools, predicts that by the year 2020 there won't be a Christian left in the world. What a fool. What a fool. Nobody will believe in God anymore but there will be the church yet. But that's the ignorance of

which the text speaks and by submitting to government, the church demonstrates that it serves Christ and that Christ is King and that he's King even over all those in authority. The church confesses that. Why do we submit to wicked, apostate, anti-Christian authority? Because Christ put those men there and we are slaves of Christ and serve the Lord Christ. He's sovereign and as his sovereignty extends to wicked men in power, we serve him by submitting to authority.

So if you want to know the truth of the matter, the Christian pilgrim is the most patriotic person in the country. He is. He's the most patriotic because he submits to those in authority. He obeys when he can. He honors those in office because he serves Christ. In a certain sense of the word, the wicked acknowledge that even now. There are those who oppose bitterly Christian education, for example, who admit that our Christian schools are the best-run schools in the state. And those who see the life of a Christian are forced even now to a certain extent to admit that the Christians are the best citizens in the whole land, and that if everybody was as obedient to government as the Christians were, this would be a country of peace. Not violence but peace and prosperity. They admit that. But it involves an admission that God is God and Christ is on the throne and that they won't do, and so they turn in fury against the church. But as we noticed last time too, there is coming a day when they will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ where they must give an account of how they served the Lord Christ in the offices in which Christ placed them, and their mouths will be shut; their adjourns of foolishness won't be heard when all men stand before the Great White Throne. And those who are faithful pilgrims will hear the voice of Christ himself, the Judge of the living and the dead, say, "Well done, good and faithful servants. Enter thou into the joy of the Lord." I can't think of anything, beloved, I'd rather hear than those words of Christ spoken to me. Wouldn't you? I know you would. Amen.

Lord our God, this is for us a very hard word but if only we recognize and confess and mean what we confess, that Christ is Lord of lords and King of kings, to carry out thy eternal counsel and will sovereignly, if we love that truth, we are grateful for it, then we will obey him when he tells us, "Submit." Help us. Help us as the days become increasingly evil. Help us as it becomes more and more difficult with the threat of persecution. Help us to be slaves of Christ to the glory of thy name. Amen.