

Submission

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Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:11-17).

As I write these words, it seems like the message found in 1 Peter has been sadly lost. The great question that Peter was addressing to the scattered saints in what is now Turkey was this: "How are we supposed to live as godly people in a pagan society?" Peter's answer is:

- Verse 11: "abstain from sinful desires."

- Verse 12: "live good lives."

Gracious Christian living means that we will display our faith in the way we live. And so we meet together to encourage each other within the faith and remind each other of what we should abstain from and what it means to live a godly life. As part of that life, Peter tells Christians to submit to the governing authorities.

And yet the Bible seems to sanction disobedience at times:

- The Egyptian midwives defied Pharaoh (**Exodus 1:15-21**).
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar's statue (**Daniel 3:12**).
- Daniel continued to pray to the Most High (**Daniel 6:10**).
- Peter and John continued to preach in Jesus' name (**Acts 4:18**).

Certainly, we might think that Peter SHOULD be advocating disobedience in the name of social justice. If slavery, for instance, should be reinstated, then we might feel obligated to fight against it out of our sense of compassion. After all, compassion is a vital part of the Christian life, as exemplified by Jesus.

However, there's no hint in Peter's text of anything advocating disobedience. He doesn't tell the free men and women in his audience to disobey the laws they don't like. Instead, Peter emphasizes *obedience* -- an obedience that extends even to times when the ruling authorities are acting in what we think is an ungodly manner. And Peter tells us in **2:13** to submit. Period. No matter WHICH political party is in control. Even if we don't like it.

Yet, Peter doesn't see it like that. As an apostle, he understands that the good and honorable work of the Christian community *consists of* submission to authority. So he is trying to get us around to his understanding, and it's an uphill slog.

Now, Peter *appears* to be arguing that unquestioned submission to authority is the preeminent mark of Christian grace and goodness. But is this really true? Is this Peter's point? Does the sum and substance of our Christian life — our good works as seen by the world — come down to some blind adherence to the principle of submission?

The answer, of course, is no. Simple, blind adherence is **not** what is desired. "*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps*" (**1 Peter 2:21**). The principle of submission is *not* our foundation. Verse 21 says submission *defines* the Christian's ways because being like the

Savior *describes* the Christian's goal. The verses in **1 Peter 2:22-25** accentuate the meekness and *submissiveness* of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we are to be like Him. Peter exhorts us to be like Christ. That is his instruction.

I think that one of the hardest steps in becoming a Christian is to voluntarily and gladly enter the waters of baptism and emerge dressed in the white garments of submission. We earnestly and honestly submit to Christ out of love for the One with Whom we now have a relationship.

As a young man, Peter brought a sword to the garden, fully prepared to resist authority. And he did so, cutting off the ear of a soldier. Now more mature, Peter says: "I have put that sword away." God has given a sword to the state, but, except for the sword of the Spirit (**Ephesians 6:17**), the church is to keep hers sheathed. For Peter, preaching now from the Bible was enough. It cuts more deeply to those who are the harshest in authority. Peter has learned his lesson. He is now free to submit. As he writes in **1 Peter 2:16-17**: true freedom is for serving.