

## **Hometown Exiles: Submission to Human Authorities**

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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1 Peter 2:11-17

As I read it this morning, you will hear that our passage begins a new section of 1 Peter. Up to now, Peter has told them who they are in Christ. They are new. They are new as individuals. They have new birth into a living hope. And they are a new community—a chosen people and a holy nation. They are so new that they feel like exiles in their hometown. Up to now, Peter has given them a general sense of what that means for their life, but now he will tell these hometown exiles some specific ways in which being a part of this holy nation changes their lives. And it's pretty interesting to see what he chooses to talk about first.

*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.*

When it comes to living life among the pagans, when it comes to living faithfully out there in the world, the very first thing Peter wants to talk to them about is international relations. The very first thing that Peter wants to talk to them about is how this chosen people, this holy nation should relate to the nation that surrounds them. Why is that the first thing he wants to address? Well, if you've heard the first two sermons in this series you probably have a pretty good idea. The church was not a favored institution. We don't know if they were being actively persecuted yet, but we do know that if you were a church member in that society, it did not go well for you. You suffered insults and malicious talk. You were socially and economically excluded. This is a pressing concern for them, so Peter puts it first.

It's also a pressing concern for us, for slightly different reasons. In the middle of all the political turmoil that has embroiled our nation, in the midst of all the Covid regulations that have directly impacted church communities, there has been a lot of talk about what the Bible means

when it says: “*Submit yourselves, for the Lord’s sake, to every human authority.*” We will not answer every question we have on this subject in this sermon, but I hope I can at least give us Peter’s basic orientation as we deal with these issues. The first thing we need to recognize is that Peter talks to them as if they are citizens of a new country. In verse 9, he told them that they were now part of a holy nation; now he calls them foreigners and strangers. Peter’s basic assumption is that when you are a part of the church, your allegiance is centered in a new place. You are now a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

As most of you know, I grew up in Canada. I love Canada. I love the lakes of Northern Ontario. I love the Canadian Rockies. I love Anne of Green Gables and the Montreal Canadians. But after I finished my time at Calvin seminary, I got a call to a church in Grand Rapids and I ended up settling here. After a few years of serving that church, I would go home to visit and a friend or a relative would say to me, “Hey, when are you going to come back to Canada? Why don’t you get a church here?” And I would always say to them that as a reformed Christian I’ve been taught to see myself first and foremost as a citizen of God’s Kingdom. I love Canadian stuff and I cheer for Canadian hockey teams, but ultimately I’m a citizen of the kingdom and a servant of the church, so when I take a call, the most important thing for me is can I serve this church? Is God-my King-calling me to this community? Are my gifts a good match for what this church needs? When you belong to Jesus, you are not a Canadian first, you are not an American first, you are neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, you belong to Christ Jesus.

This is not some minor theme in the New Testament; it’s pervasive. Jesus preaches the kingdom of God. “Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand...the Kingdom of heaven is like...” “Seek first the Kingdom of God...” This distinction is in Jesus’ name. We follow Jesus Christ. Jesus is his name; Christ is his title. It means ‘anointed one’ because he is anointed as our king. Saying Jesus Christ is the same as saying Jesus is my King. You acknowledge yourself as a citizen of the kingdom. This distinction in citizenship is in Paul: “Our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a savior from there, Our Lord, Jesus Christ.” You sense this distinction in the way Peter asks the church to submit to the Roman authorities. He asks them to do it for the Lord’s sake. You submit, but not because Caesar is Lord, you did it because that’s what King Jesus would have you do. There are governing authorities, earthly rulers and they need a certain kind of respect; but the King of Kings, the Lord of your life, is Jesus Christ your Lord.

That doesn’t mean you don’t love your country. It just means you keep your love of country in its proper place. *It’s the difference*

*between nationalism and patriotism.* Patriotism is simple love of your country and its culture. Nationalism is when you think your country is the special agent of God's purposes on earth. Patriotism is good. Wave the flag on national holidays. Sing the national anthem at sporting events. Get misty-eyed when watching reruns of the Miracle on Ice. Get involved in politics. Serve in government. Join the military. There are men and women in our church who have served their country with great sacrifice. There's a wall of names in our church building naming those who've given their life in service of their country. We thank those patriots. Nationalism is bad. Nationalism is when you think of your nation as God's favored people, beloved among all the nations of the world and a unique agent of his holy purposes. Nationalism is when you talk as though setting your eyes on Jesus and setting your eyes on the flag of your country amount to the same thing. It's idolatry.

Someone sent me a sermon by Alistair Begg a while back. Begg is a well-known preacher. He's originally from Scotland, but he does ministry in the United States now. The sermon was called Strangers and Exiles. The sermon got its title from our passage, but it was based on the book of Daniel. Daniel is a really good model of what it means to be a hometown exile. He lived in Babylon, he worked in the Babylonian government, he helped out Nebuchadnezzar as best he could, but he never thought of himself as anything other than a servant of his true heavenly King. In his sermon, Begg talked about how he went to speak to a group of business people and civic leaders. He laid out some of the moral and spiritual challenges facing our society. After naming those challenges he said he could feel everyone in the room lean forward expecting him to start calling for political solutions-to vote this way, to support that policy. Here's how he describes that moment: *"I could read people's eyes and they were coming along, and coming along and they're looking forward to the punchline and they're looking forward to me engaging in some political explanation. How disappointed they all were when I explain to them that neither the United States nor the United Kingdom are [the people of God]. We are all Babylon. We are in the world represented as Babylon confronted by a kingdom of this world as members of a kingdom of another world. Political affiliation, as significant as it is, is not the issue when it comes to these matters. The matter is God's kingdom and God's plan. The God of Abram Isaac and Jacob has called out a people for himself...throughout the world today the Spirit of God has been moving and the ascended King Jesus reigns, and God is accomplishing his purposes in the world. And he is not uniquely concerned with Brexit or the United States elections. He is supremely concerned with his church."*

We are part of a different kingdom and we serve a different king. Our hope is not in who wins the next election, our hope is in the power of God to bring his kingdom. The church is the place where that living hope is proclaimed. Not only that, it's a place where that living hope is formed in us. When our lives are knit into the life of the church, the Kingdom vision burns bright. When the church becomes a peripheral institution somewhere on the fringes of our lives, the Kingdom vision fades. The living hope fades; nationalism (and all sorts of other isms) begin to take its place. Like Daniel in Babylon, we work for the welfare of the city, we love our neighbors, we work for good government and justice, but do it with a lively sense that we are strangers and exiles. We are servants of another king who will one day descend from heaven and return to this world to make all things new.

Until that great day, how shall the church relate to the ruling authorities? Peter says, submit to them for the Lord's sake. Wow. How do we understand this?

There are two sides to this command. On the one hand, Peter is calling for us to put up with a lot for the sake of being good, cooperative citizens. We know that this call to submit to human authorities was written during a time when the human authorities were hostile. Consider this: people don't all agree on when 1 Peter was written. I've taken a more conservative position on that question in that I'm assuming that the letter was written in the early to mid-60's AD. Do you know who was emperor in the early 60's? Nero. Was Nero a friend to the church? No, he was the opposite. He killed Christians. Not across the empire, only in Rome, but still, he was a thoroughly pagan ruler, he was an enemy of the church and yet Peter calls the church to honor him and submit to his authority. In Peter's view, it's pretty clear that submission to authorities isn't just submission when it seems convenient, or when we like the rule, our true Lord calls us to submit to human authorities even when it's difficult and uncomfortable.

On the other hand, there are limits to our submission. Peter says our true King is Jesus. Peter says that Christ's authority is the one that matters. So there will be occasions when the authority of the earthly authority and the will of our true king will come into such conflict that we will have to quietly, but firmly disobey. Resist. Think of Daniel again. He worked for the welfare of the city, he worked within the parameters of Babylonian authority. But when King Darius said that he wasn't allowed to pray to his God, but had to bow down to the golden image instead, Daniel resisted. Without fanfare, without bluster, without making any angry posts on Facebook, Daniel kept praying to God. It got

him arrested and thrown into the lion's den. Sometimes the authorities must be resisted.

When you want to understand what the New Testament says about relationship to government, there are two groups of texts to keep in mind. There are submission texts and resistance texts. On the one hand you have 1 Peter 2 and Romans 13. Submit to the authorities. God has established them. On the other hand, you have Revelation 13 and Acts 4. Revelation was written later than Peter and by that time the ruling powers were actively persecuting the church. Relations between powers of Rome and the people of God had further deteriorated. Rome. So in Revelation 13 Rome is depicted as the beast out of the sea who utters proud blasphemies and who needs to be resisted. In Acts 4, the religious authorities in Jerusalem tell the disciples that they were not allowed to 'speak or teach in the name of Jesus.' Do you remember how Peter and John reply? "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you or to him?" They resist the human authorities.

Do you see the tension between these two sets of texts? Submit to the authorities, God established them. Which is right in God's eyes, to listen to you or to listen to him? This calls for wisdom. It is not always clear when to comply and when to resist. I know some people talk as though it is, but I would beg to differ.

What is clear to me, and what is clear in our passage, and in the rest of the New Testament, when we do resist, our resistance is a positive resistance. It takes the form of good lives in the face of opposition and slander. *"Live such good lives among the pagans that even though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God."* Our chief weapon against those who oppose us is steady witness to what we believe accompanied by good deeds.

In one sense, the Bible is a deeply revolutionary book. Jesus comes to call for repentance, which means he calls for people to turn around completely. And at the end of Revelation the voice from the throne says, "Behold I am making all things new!" So in that sense, Jesus changes everything. But sometimes when people talk about a revolution they think of guns and shouting and people throwing things in the streets. The Bible is not revolutionary in that sense.

Jesus doesn't act like that kind of revolutionary. People wanted him to be that kind of revolutionary – to overthrow the Romans and restore the kingdom to Israel. But he resists that. He proclaims the kingdom of God. He heals the sick. He speaks the truth. He doesn't shout, 'Death to the emperor.' Jesus changes everything, he brings down rulers from their thrones and he will overturn all the injustices of this world, but his means are different, his timetable is slower, and his

revolution goes deeper. Not only does he change the powers and policies of the world, he changes people's hearts.

Daniel isn't that kind of revolutionary. When Darius tells him he can't pray, Daniel and his friends don't start a rally in the street. He doesn't fulminate against the evil of Darius' reign. They calmly stand before the Babylonian kings and proclaim the truth of God, and they keep praying, they continue to worship God.

Even in Revelation 13 after Rome is described as a fierce beast seeking to make war against the people of God, seeking to devour them, what kind of action does Revelation call for on behalf of the church? Verse 10: "this calls for patience, endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people." There is plenty of violence and bloodshed in Revelation. There is plenty of description of the enemies of King Jesus being utterly defeated, but do you know how much of that is brought about by people like us? None of it. We testify to the truth, we embody the truth, we pray and trust God to do his work. *We live good lives among the pagans that even though they accuse us of doing wrong, they see our good deeds and give glory to our Father in heaven.*

Recently some members of this church helped out another member of this church family who needed a bunch of stuff moved out of their basement. I'll keep this all anonymous, but everyone involved knows the names and the faces. It was an emergency need, so we put the word out there, and 10 people from our congregation showed up on a day's notice ready to work. I know all of these good people and I know that they come from both sides of the political aisle. Some republicans and some democrats. But on that day those political convictions were completely subsumed in their deeper identity as members of God's family and citizens of the kingdom of God. And out of that identity they worked together until the basement was cleared and the emergency was averted. Now I don't know if there were any Grand Rapids pagans watching them that day, but if there were I can imagine the conversation. 'Hey I know some of those people over there! She's a democrat! I'm her Facebook friend and I've seen her posts.' 'Oh interesting. I know that guy she's carrying the couch with. He's a staunch republican, staunch with a capital S.' 'No kidding, and look at them all working together. How did that happen?' 'I think they're all Jesus people. I think they're all part of the same church.' 'Hmm. I'm not a church guy, but I gotta admit...It's nice to see them working together. Gives you hope.' Yes. We would say it gives you a living hope, a kingdom hope. "Live such good lives among the pagans that even though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and give glory to your father in heaven."

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