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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

Today our passage of scripture addresses how Christians should be good citizens, but before we read it, it’s important you understand the historical context when Peter wrote these words. Let’s go back in time.

The setting is Rome and the year is 44 A.D. Claudius is the Roman Emperor. His niece, Agrippina, seduces her uncle and he agrees to marry her and to adopt her son. He gives his adopted son the name Nero.

Agrippina was an ambitious woman who poisoned her two previous husbands, including Nero’s biological father. Claudius already had a biological son named Britannicus who was in line to the throne. But through the crafty scheming of Agrippina, she convinced Claudius to name Nero as the next in line to the throne—and he finally agreed.

Soon after, Agrippina arranged for Claudius to be poisoned to death. After her first two husbands, you’d think he would be a little suspicious! So at the tender age of 17 Nero became the fifth Roman emperor. Nero earned a reputation as one of the most wicked, depraved rulers in history.

According to the Roman historian Seutonius, Nero and his mother then plotted the death of Britannicus so he couldn’t pose a threat to the throne. What goes around comes around, because by the time Nero was 21, he hated his mother. He made four attempts to kill her, three times with poison and once with a boat specially designed to break apart and sink. Agrippina avoided the poisons (she was the expert) and when the boat sank, she swam ashore. Soon after, Nero sent an assassin who clubbed and stabbed her to death.

Nero fancied himself a great singer. He had little talent, but he loved to dress up in costumes and perform on stage in front of an audience who were forbidden to leave while he performed.

In the summer of 64 A.D., a terrible fire broke out in Rome. For nine days, it raged out of control and two thirds of the city was destroyed. Although it was rumored Nero set the fire, most historians agree he wasn’t in the city when it started, but upon hearing about the fire he returned. The notion that Nero fiddled while Rome burned is a fable of history: fiddles and violins weren’t created until the 17th century. But Tacitus reported, “At the very time that Rome burned, he mounted his private stage and sang about the destruction of Troy.”

Because of the rumor that he set the fire, Nero quickly looked for a group to blame. He found the perfect scapegoat in an obscure sect of people called Christians. At his direction, Believers were arrested and executed. Tacitus wrote: “Besides being put to death, they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs. Others were set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed...covered by inflammable matter, they were set on fire to serve as torches during the night. Or they were tied to stakes in Nero’s gardens while he drove around in his chariot, naked, indulging himself in his midnight revels, gloating over the dying agonies of his victims.”

After a few more years of perverse behavior, there were plots to remove Nero. In 68 A.D., the Senate voted to have him flogged to death. As they were coming to take him, Nero committed suicide. His last words were “Qualis artifex pereo.” (What an artist the world loses in me) Nero was 31 years old.

We believe the Apostle Peter was in Rome when he wrote this letter, and that it was written when Nero was the emperor. So how would you think Peter would direct Christians to relate to the government authorities? Read his words in I Peter 2:13-17:

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, 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 men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

In verse 17, we find four statements about relationships. These four statements represent four different dimensions of life. In all these relationships, our response should be God-directed. Just note the first three, and then we’ll devote our attention to the fourth. For instance, we are told that

1. To all people, we should show proper respect

That includes all people everywhere, regardless of race, religion, or nationality. All people are created by God, and you don’t have to agree with them or even like them. But you can respect them. What about a mass murderer like Charles Manson—do we have to respect him? No. The word “proper respect” means to assign value. Some people deserve more respect than others.

Unless someone has done something extreme to forfeit their value to the world, we must respect them.

2. To believers we are to show unconditional love

It’s the word *agape*. The Bible never commands us to love those who aren’t part of the Body of Christ, but we are to respect them. But we are commanded to show *agape*, unselfish love to all our brothers and sisters in Christ. Isn’t that easy, since we’re all so lovable? No, we can’t love other believers without the supernatural power of Christ.

3. To God we are to show loving fear

That’s not a paralyzing fear that causes you to hide from God. It involves awe and reverence as you consider the awesome power of God. The Bible says “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Proverbs 1:7) When you truly fear God, you’ll say, “God I love you so much that I will obey you, and I fear you so much that I’m afraid of what will happen if I willfully disobey You!”

4. To the government we should show honor

In this message on Christian citizenship, we’ll spend the rest of the time focusing on how we should relate to our government. Some people don’t like Bible messages dealing with government or politics. They scream that you shouldn’t mix religion and politics. The old Methodist evangelist Sam Jones used to say, “The man who yells the loudest about mixing religion with politics usually doesn’t have much religion to mix with his politics!” I’m not talking about religion or politics, but I do want to share with you about what the Bible teaches about God and Government.

If you want to be a good Christian Citizen, you should make three affirmations:

I. I WILL SUBMIT TO THE GOVERNMENT FOR GOD’S SAKE!

Verse 13 says we are to “submit to every authority instituted among men.” There are two words that people don’t like: submit - and authority. The reason we don’t like them is that we are all rebels at heart. But the Bible says that all of us should submit to the authority of our government.

The word “submit” is a military word, *hupotasso*, literally meaning to “line up under the authority.” When a company of soldiers lined up under a commanding officer, it was *hupotasso*. It doesn’t say we should submit only if the government official is a benevolent leader. Remember, Peter wrote these words when Nero was the Emperor! He wasn’t telling them to submit to Nero for Nero’s sake—he said do it for the Lord’s sake.

To those of us who are followers of Jesus in the 21st century, it means we should be law-abiding citizens. We should pay our taxes, obey the seat belt law, we shouldn’t park in handicapped places...and I’m preaching to myself now, we should obey the speed limit laws! I think the last part of my body to be sanctified is my right foot, but God and Cindy (not necessarily in that order) are working on me. Peter gives two reasons why we should submit to government authorities:

1. It’s God’s will

In verse 14, we read “for it is God’s will.” Have you ever said, “Oh, if I only knew what God’s will for my life is.” This is one of many places in the Bible where it gives us God’s will in black letters on a white page. It is God’s will for you to submit to the government for the Lord’s sake.

When parents tell their kids they can’t do something, or tell them to do something, usually the child will ask, “Why?” The #1 response to that “why?” is “because I said so, that’s why!” If you asked, “God, why do I have to pull over when a policeman stops me?” He says to you, “Because I said so, that’s why!” But He actually gives us another good reason.

2. It will muzzle the fools

In verse 14 it says that by submitting to the government authorities we will “silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.” The actual word means to put a muzzle on an animal. The word “ignorant” is the word *agnosian*, from which we get our English word “agnostic.”

In Peter’s time, Christians were accused of many false crimes. They were accused of being atheists because they didn’t worship the pantheon of gods, but rather insisted Jesus was the only God. They were accused of being cannibals, because they spoke of eating flesh and drinking blood. But the main crime they were arrested for was treason. They refused to confess “Caesar is Lord.” Because of this, they were considered to be dangerous traitors. While Christians should only confess that “Jesus is Lord” Peter is telling them that by submitting the government, they would silence those who were accusing them of treason.

Did you know many Americans think we’re crazy for being so devoted to Jesus? Some people think folks like us who gather every Sunday and worship and study the Bible are really part of a scary, dangerous cult. They lump us together with people like David Koresh who made his last stand near Waco. Or they compare us to Jim Jones who led his followers to drink poisoned Kool-Aid in Guyana. Many Americans speak of the danger of the “Christian Right.”

They think we want to replace the Constitution with the Bible, and that we want to elect a preacher as president—not on your life! People who say that about us are described in verse 14: they are ignorant of what the Bible says about how we should live. Our job is to convince them we are good citizens, and that we want for our nation only that which our founding Fathers intended.

II. I WILL SEEK TO UNDERSTAND GOD’S PURPOSE FOR GOVERNMENT!

If you and I are going to be good Christian citizens we must understand *why* government exists. There are many things our government does in America, but according to this passage, God instituted government for two simple reasons. According to verse 14, government officials are sent by God for a reason. It says they “are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.”

C.S. Lewis stated it this way: “The State exists simply to promote and to protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life. A husband and wife chatting over a fire, a couple of friends having a game of darts in a pub, a man reading a book in his own room or digging in his own garden—that is what the State is there for. And unless they are helping to prolong and protect such moments all the laws, armies, and courts are a waste of time.” (*Mere Christianity*, p. 169) Let’s examine these two purposes of government:

1. Government is instituted to punish wrong conduct

The Bible says God uses government as His earthly instrument to punish wrongdoers. The Apostle Paul wrote: “Rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong...if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:3-4) A sword was not used to slap someone on the wrist—it was a lethal weapon. It was an object for capital

punishment. To me, and many others, this is a clear Biblical justification for the use of capital punishment for the worst crimes.

It is never right to seek personal vengeance when we have been wronged; that’s the job of our criminal justice system, which is part of our government. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter drew his sword to strike back. Jesus told him to put away his sword. He said, “All who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52) Even as Jesus was being arrested he submitted to the government. He didn’t resist. He was telling Peter, “Don’t fight against these government officials, because they have the God-given power to execute justice with the sword.” Even as He was being unjustly arrested, Jesus was acknowledging this important principle.

2. Government is instituted to commend right conduct

Not only is government ordained by God to punish evil, but it is directed by God to *commend* good behavior. Just imagine driving along and being pulled over by a policeman. He walks to your window and says, “I just wanted to compliment you for driving so safely. Here’s a coupon for a cup of coffee at Starbucks.” It probably won’t happen, but that’s part of government’s role! For instance, the Tyler Police Department recently recognized officers and citizens who performed in exceptional ways during times of crisis. Any time a government organization recognizes people for doing good, they are fulfilling God’s purpose for government.

When President George H. Bush was in office, he started a program called “a thousand points of light.” These were awards to give recognition and honor to American citizens who were making a positive difference in our culture. He was right on target!

Now, in order for our government to punish wrong and reward right, it brings up an important issue. We live in a post-modern culture where people insist there are no absolute truths—no absolute standards for right and wrong. They say, “What’s right for you may not be right for me.” Or “What’s wrong for you may not be wrong for me.” That’s why we are in a national debate about abortion and homosexual marriages.

America is in trouble because we have departed from the basic moral code that served us well for almost 200 years. It is known as the Judeo-Christian ethic, and it is based on the moral code of the Bible, including the Ten Commandments.

Our founding fathers made it clear they considered the Bible as an important basis for our standard for right and wrong. The second President of the U.S., John Adams wrote: “Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to government of any other.” (Speech given October 11, 1798) His son, John Quincy Adams, who later became the sixth President, wrote: “The law given from Sinai was a civil and municipal as well as a moral and religious code; it contained many statutes...of universal application—laws essential to the existence of men in society.” (*Letters of John Quincy Adams*, James M. Alden, ed., p.61)

One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence was a physician from Philadelphia named Benjamin Rush. He is often called the Father of American Medicine. He served as U.S. Treasurer and was part of the group who composed our Constitution. Dr. Rush wrote: “By renouncing the Bible, philosophers swing from their moorings upon all moral subjects... It is the only correct map of the human heart that ever has been published... All systems of religion, morals, and government not founded upon it must perish.” (Letter to John Adams, January 23, 1807)

As citizens we must understand God’s purpose for government and we must speak up to maintain the moral standards that have allowed God to bless our nation. There is another affirmation we should make as Christian citizens:

3. I am free to be a slave of God!

Look at the first and last words of verse 16. First it says, “Live as free men” then it says, “live as servants of God.” In America, we enjoy many precious freedoms. Among them are freedom of worship, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. But before “freedom” was an American word, it was a Bible word.

Freedom is a RIGHT, but it also carries responsibilities. We are free, but we gladly submit to our government, and we submit to God as His servants. The word for servant here really means slave. That means we always answer to a higher power.

You may be wondering, “I know I should submit to my government, but what if my government tells me to disobey God?” Fortunately, that hasn’t happened in America, but if it ever does, that’s when Christians would choose to obey God rather than man. This is called Christian Civil Disobedience. It would be our choice when manmade laws command us to violate God’s laws.

In the Old Testament, Daniel provides a perfect example of civil disobedience. He was a child of God in exile in Babylon, yet he submitted to the Babylonian leaders. But when a law was issued that said people could *only* pray to King Darius, Daniel committed civil disobedience: He broke the law and prayed to the God of heaven. He was thrown into a den of hungry lions, but God delivered Him.

If our government ever passed a law saying I could no longer preach God’s Word—I’d preach anyway. If our government ever passed legislation forbidding me to pray publicly, I’d make the choice to pray anyway.

At this time our U.S. Supreme Court is reviewing a lawsuit to remove the words “under God” from our pledge of allegiance. I don’t think they’ll rule that it should be removed, but should they come to that decision, until I die, I will keep on saying, “one nation, UNDER GOD, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.”

CONCLUSION

As we see the degradation of decency in America, do you know what most Christians are doing? Nothing. Some wring their hands and moan, “Ain’t it awful?” And they gather in their holy huddles to hide from what’s happening. The British Statesman, Edmund Burke wrote: “Evil triumphs when good men do nothing.” Because of what is at stake in America, it is imperative that we be committed, conscientious Christian citizens. Here are three things we can do as Christian Citizens to make a positive difference in America:

1. Study and vote

Study the issues and make plans to vote in every election. When it comes to moral issues, study the issues with the Bible in one hand and the position of the candidates in the other. My advice to you is: don’t vote Democrat or Republican, vote the Word of God. According to the American Family Association only about 50 percent of the Bible believing Christians vote in each election.

2. Pray for our leaders

As I said last week, we are in a culture war in America. But the weapons of our warfare are not physical weapons but they are God-powered weapons that can tear down every stronghold Satan builds. Our secret weapon is prayer. The Bible instructs us to pray for those in authority over us that we may lead peaceful quiet lives.

After Easter, I’m going to share a letter with you I’d like for us to send to our President reassuring him that the members of Green Acres are praying for him. We’re going to have tables set up in the lobby for you to add your signature to the letter. I hope we can send him a letter with several thousand signatures, but more than that, with several thousand prayers.

3. Communicate your convictions

You shouldn’t do anything *before* you pray, but *after* you pray, you should let your voice be heard. Have you noticed how vocal and active some of these groups are that have a moral agenda different from what we believe? For instance, there is an organization called GLAAD which stands for Gay Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. It is one of dozens of national organizations who are lobbying, demonstrating, boycotting, and sending thousands of letters and emails to legislators.

There may be many of you who don’t agree with abortion or same sex marriage, but since it doesn’t involve you personally, you are apathetic. You’re standing on the sidelines because you think it’s not your battle. When it comes to moral issues, many Christians have been guilty of the sin of silence. I encourage you to write, email, visit, call and do whatever you will to let our leaders know how you stand on moral issues.

If we don’t let our voice be heard, what kind of nation will this be when our children and grandchildren are adults? During World War II, there was a German Pastor named Martin Niemöller. He fought for the Germans in WWI, but he came to believe that what Hitler was doing was evil. He was finally arrested and spent time at Dachau. He narrowly avoided being executed before the war ended. Listen to his words in 1945: “First they came for the

Communists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up, because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me.” Let's submit to our government leaders, as long as we don't have to dishonor God. Let's pray and get involved because if Christian citizens don't speak up, who will?

OUTLINE

FOUR GOD-DIRECTED RELATIONSHIPS (v. 17)

1. All people: Proper respect
2. Believers: Unconditional love
3. God: Loving Fear
4. Government: Honor

I. I WILL SUBMIT TO THE GOVERNMENT FOR GOD’S SAKE!

1. Why? It’s God’s will
2. It will muzzle the fools

II. I WILL SEEK TO UNDERSTAND GOD’S PURPOSE FOR GOVERNMENT!

1. Punish wrong conduct
2. Commend right conduct
3. I am free to be a slave of God!

Christian (Civil) Disobedience: When manmade laws command us to violate God’s laws.

How to make a difference:

1. Study and vote
2. Pray for our leaders
3. Communicate your convictions