

Thriving Under The Emperor

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[0:00] Verses 13 to 17. Just another prayer before we begin.

Father, we recognize this is your word and we ask that you would help us to understand it. And that in understanding it, we would believe it.

And that in believing it, we would obey it. For your son's sake. Amen. Well, I suspect that the section of Peter's letter into which we now venture will be a difficult one for many of us, if not all of us, to accept.

We should be fully prepared in the next few weeks and in the next few passages for God to offend us. Which is something we should expect as fallen sinners, right?

It's something that we should embrace as redeemed sinners. It was Tim Keller who said, Only if your God can outrage and challenge you will you know that you worship the real God and not a figment of your imagination.

[2:04] If your God never disagrees with you, you might just be worshiping an idealized version of yourself. And we need to be prepared anytime we come to the word, but maybe especially in these next few passages and the content that Peter deals with here.

Prepared for God to challenge us. Prepared for him perhaps to disagree with us. And of course, embrace that. Repent where repentance is necessary.

And to be faithful. Now the reason I say that is because the overarching principle of this section is detestable to modern sensibilities.

The theme of Peter's instruction, beginning in verse 13 all the way down to verse 7 of chapter 3, is submission. Submission.

Citizens are to submit to their rulers. Slaves are to submit to their masters. Wives are to submit to their husbands.

[3:21] Submission is difficult enough. But in each of these cases, as we read God's word, Peter instructs this submission, even though the authority figure is unbelieving, often corrupt, and even oppressive.

And what's more, is that it isn't the potential oppressors that Peter actually addresses. He could have. The scriptures certainly do.

He doesn't. He addresses those who are most likely to be mistreated and abused in each of those relationships. Now modern theories like to look at this and they categorize and determine that the problem is authority itself.

That it's power dynamics itself that create the issue. And that true liberation only comes when people are free from such power dynamics.

And you see this in all kinds of modern theories, particularly critical theory and its outworkings. The Bible wholeheartedly disagrees. It is not authority itself.

[4:39] The Bible recognizes that the real issue is sin. The real issue is sinners who rebel against God's good design. The scriptures affirm that it is God who authorizes human government with the power of the sword.

He authorizes the church with the keys of the kingdom. The Lord authorizes husbands to rule their homes, parents to rule their children, teachers to rule their students, employers to rule their employees, and so on and so forth.

Authority itself is God's idea. And the godly exercise of authority is one way that we actually bear the image of God in the world.

From the most powerful of us to the least powerful. In his book called Authority, Jonathan Lehman is so helpful on this point. Even to say, even as children, we are invested with a sphere of authority.

Caden's sphere of authority at this point in his life might be his bedroom. He rules over that bedroom. He has responsibilities that come along with that reign.

[6:05] And as a sinner, he can ruin it. As someone who has fallen, he can exercise that authority in a way that isn't godly and is unrighteous.

And so on it goes for each one of us. But authority is God's idea. We bear his image through it. And until Jesus returns to bring the fullness of his kingdom and his perfect rule, sinners are all that there is to fill the authoritative roles that God has designed for his glory and for our good.

In other words, the answer to oppression is not to reject or to alter God's design in authority.

The answer to oppression is to call sinners to repentance and to faith and to the lordship of Jesus Christ. And we do that by calling out sin, by standing for truth, while also properly submitting to the authorities that God has established.

Whether that's in the sphere of the government or in the sphere of the church or in the sphere of the home or in the sphere of our workplaces and so on.

[7:32] Well, there's two things we need to acknowledge about this text in this series of texts. And one is that Peter didn't seek to deal with these categories exhaustively.

This is not a comprehensive treatise on these issues and we can certainly look to other passages of Scripture in the Bible to help build a more robust theology of authority and submission.

And we ought to do that. That's not what Peter is doing here. We need to recognize that. And yet still, this is the word of God. And we need to let it speak without trying to blunt the sharp edges of the sword of the Spirit.

There is a way for us to approach texts like this one and the next one and the one after.

Over-qualifying them so much that we end up rendering them ineffective.

We end up rendering them as if they have no authority over us at all. And we need to recognize that what Peter writes for us in these texts is God's word. This is God's word for us.

[8:37] So we will not over-qualify them this morning in order to try to remove the sharpness of what Peter intends to say and what God intends to say to us.

We need not think of this as all that God has to say. And yet we still must recognize that this is indeed the word of the Lord. And so Peter is addressing the specific situation of these Christians in the first century which has plenty of parallels to even our circumstances today and for Christians all over the world.

He does not seek to weigh out the ethics of political revolution. He does not seek here to weigh out the ethics of when and how it's permissible for oppressed people to resist resist or to even flee from their oppressors.

There are passages that help us with that. This is not one of them. That's not what he's attempting to do. We need to recognize that. The second thing that we need to recognize is that submission itself is not the goal of the text.

Submission itself is not the goal of the text. Now, there is a way to take a text like this and many like it and we see this mostly in the applications of the marriage relationship when we come to texts like this.

[9:55] We find those who would come so strongly from the perspective of authority that they would see submission as the great end of these passages and that is not the great end of these passages.

The entire section revolves around the example of Jesus in verses 21 to 25. You won't read it now but you might mark it. You might even see the next series of sections even getting into chapter 3 and further deeper into chapter 3.

Peter's dealing with all of these things and he's intentionally right at the heart of it, right in the middle of it, he's put the example of Christ and Christ's own submission telling us that the goal of this text is to instruct us on true Christ-likeness.

Submission isn't the goal. Christ is the goal and as we are pursuing Christ, we must learn as his people to rightly submit to proper authority.

Thriving in exile then is about faithfully following Jesus and that is what is Peter's concern here.

Now, the first category he covers is submission to civil authorities.

[11:18] Thriving in exile means thriving under the emperor and Peter helpfully instructs us here on just how to do that.

Now let me give you the summary of his thesis and then we're going to dig in. Here's his point, okay? Christians must submit to civil authorities under Christ.

Obedying the rule of law except when doing so would result in disobedience to God. And the goal of this submission is to be like Jesus and to prove the goodness of Christianity in the public sphere.

That's the general idea here. Peter's saying Christians must submit to civil authorities insofar as obedience to the civil authority does not require disobedience to God.

And the reason we must do this is because we want to be like Jesus and we want to make Jesus look good to the world. Okay? Four things to work through here.

[12:25] First, let's look at the general principle. The general principle in verses 13 and 14. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

Now Peter's supplying a moral principle here. This is a moral principle that transcends all systems of human government.

So that a Christian in the democratic United States in communist China those who live beneath the Islamic State in a place perhaps like Iran or in other places around the world despite the vast differences of our cultures despite the vast differences of our social orders despite the vast differences of our political systems we are all bound to this moral principle that Peter affirms here. We may apply it in unique ways depending on those differences but the principle itself stands. And the principle in a general sense is this. We must willfully submit to human authorities that rule over us.

We must willfully submit to human authorities that rule over us. Let's work this out in the text. The ESV renders this human institutions.

[13:58] Human institutions in this case doesn't refer to societies or organizations. It refers to principles of order instituted by human authorities.

Okay, so this is not Peter's way of saying you must be loyal to a political framework. This is not Peter saying Christians must be loyal to a particular type of order.

He's saying we must be subservient to subject ourselves to those principles of order that are instituted by the authorities that we have.

older translations like the King James Version render this as ordinances which I think probably gives us a better sense of what Peter's focus is here. And that Peter has civil authorities particularly in mind is made clear from the fact that he names the supreme ruler of the empire Caesar in his case along with whatever officials that ruler has authorized to carry out punishment for evil and praise for good.

Now punishment for evil praise for good that's God's idea in it. It is God who establishes human government he authorizes that human government with the power of the sword.

[15:23] That is a distinct power. The church does not have that power. That was one of the problems coming through middle ages even through some of the reformation time is the church was in some cases trying to hold the power of the sword and the government was trying to hold the power of the keys of the kingdom.

We can't mix those things up. God has given civil authority the power of the sword and generally speaking that is to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good.

In our situation we don't have a supreme emperor we have a president and a vice president we have a congress representative government and so it flows.

Governors state congresses we have federal institutions that are for law enforcement we have local institutions that are for law enforcement all of it included here first to the supreme leader and then to all whom he puts underneath that's what Peter makes clear.

Now that he emphasizes they are human institutions or human ordinances is important pushes against the cultural notion of Peter's day that the emperor was divine.

[16:43] Peter's making it clear that when he tells these Christians that they must be subject to human authorities he is not saying that their

subjection is the same as their subjection to God.

It is vastly different and we must understand the distinction. There is a distinction between God's law and man's law and Peter makes that clear for us.

Now the bottom line here is that we are to submit to the rule of law even though that law issues from creatures rather than God and this is Peter's affirmation that God himself ordains government and gives it the power of the sword.

So though Christians are first and foremost certainly concerned with the law of God and obeying God we are servants of God that doesn't mean that we are automatically free to rebel against the laws of men.

In other words the disposition of the Christian heart is to be one of submission not of anarchy obedience not rebellion and someone may come to this passage and say Peter is just so ignorant here so naive to the kind of oppression that comes from human authorities if Peter really cared about the marginalized in society he wouldn't have focused so much on such an offensive command but we know that isn't true Peter was the marginalized he wasn't ignorant of that and he wasn't naive to it Peter was a personal witness to the wicked corruption that led to the crucifixion of the son of God he himself had been beaten and imprisoned by Jewish authorities in Jerusalem not for breaking the law but for preaching the gospel let's not forget that the

[18:57] Roman emperor at the time he wrote this letter was none other than Emperor Nero an avowed hater and persecutor of Christians Peter himself would eventually be crucified by the very man that he writes here that Christians are to submit to and to obey and yet this is the word of God and God's word stands the moral imperative to submit to the rule of law is not negated or diminished when the rulers themselves are wicked men and they are almost always wicked men how could Peter press such a command what could possibly be the reason he tells us at the very beginning be subject he says for the

Lord's sake be subject for the Lord's sake this is as much about what Peter says here as what he doesn't say he didn't say submit to them for the preservation of your life he didn't say submit to them so that you can try to help build a better tomorrow for your children he didn't say submit to them so that you might pursue peace all of those things are great all of those things would be affirmed in other passages that's not what Peter says because none of those things are foundational to the moral imperative the moral imperative is founded on the glory of Christ we submit because Christ taught this submission we submit because Christ modeled this submission we submit because God is glorified in this submission it's not fundamentally for our sake it is fundamentally for the

Lord's sake and as we have sung so often in the last several weeks his glory is our good even when his glory means suffering that's the general principle now let's look at a particular motivation a particular motivation we find this in verse 15 look at it with me again for this is the will of God that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people this is the will of God he says why well in part it is so that by doing good which is directly connected to the previous verse the good that governors are meant to praise in God's design by doing good being a good citizen you will put to silence the foolishness of or the ignorance of foolish people now

I want you to put yourself in these Christian sandals for a moment Christians in the Roman Empire at that time were already held in suspicion this is a long time before the days of Constantine where Christianity was set up as something to be encouraged that is not the condition and the circumstances these Christians were in they were held in suspicion they rejected the Roman gods even though they were not atheist as we acknowledge atheism that's the label that they were given not because they didn't believe there was a god but because they didn't believe in the Roman gods well that causes some suspicion in Roman culture they refused to worship the emperor historically culturally in Asia minor the emperor cult was magnified Caesar the emperor he was not just a leader he was divine a son of God and so when the Christians come through and decide that they will not bow to him they will not worship him and we have many many examples of this playing out in history they were persecuted they were killed for that the Christians in this day as they should be doing!

[23:35] lived in stark contrast to the immorality of Roman culture that produces suspicion unbelievers looked at Christian worship gatherings

they called them secret meetings and that provided this opportunity for rumors of sedition to begin to spread so the people outside of the church looked at the church not as something that was good not as something that was positive they didn't look at it as a well we'll just agree to disagree kind of thing they looked at it with suspicion and so when Nero decides that he will send a few people to set the city on fire who does he blame the Christians why they were the easy target they were already under suspicion all of that happening at the time that Peter is writing this letter that Peter is pastoring in the city of Rome in the heart of it all Nero taking advantage of the public's misconceptions blaming them for a great many things leading to widespread martyrdom

Nero himself put nearly a thousand Christians in Rome to death in the Colosseum for the entertainment of the mob they cheered as you and me were devoured by animals and put to death and executed for sport that's the culture they lived in and of course none of this is true of real Christianity is it was easy for them to look and say well we have a king his name is Nero but they say they have a different king whose name is Jesus we bow to Nero they bow to this other Jesus surely that is a threat to Rome surely that is a threat to our way of life they say that we ought not live the way we live that God is displeased by that that God will pour his judgment out on us for that they talk of this place called hell they're trying to ruin our way of life that's how they were looked on and of course that was a misconception wasn't it

Jesus himself when being interrogated by Pontius Pilate said my kingdom is not of this world if my kingdom were of this world my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews but my kingdom is not from this world and what is it that Peter has repeatedly referred to Christians as in this letter exiles this is not our home loved ones this is not our home and we are not to try and make it our home we are exiles in the world but the church's mission is not to overtake the world that's not why God has left us here Jesus has overcome the world for us the church's mission is to preach the gospel the church's mission is to display the glory of Christ's kingdom while we await its fullness at his return it's not for us to make the kingdom of this world our own but to represent the kingdom of

God as glorious and superior to the kingdom of this world and Peter's point is that proper submission to authority is the strongest apologetic we have against those who would assume that Christians are always up to no good that submitting properly to civil authorities proves to the world around us that we are not fundamentally revolutionist and like the suspicions of first century Rome it's not uncommon for unbelievers to paint Christians today as threats to their way of life we are not a threat to their way of life God is the gospel is and there's a difference in those two things but it's God's will that by living in proper submission to the rule of law the church will silence the ignorance of foolish people who love their sin more than they love the truth that's the bottom line does this mean that we are to blindly obey everything the government says is there any sense in which Christians can and should stand in opposition to human authority well that's what Peter answers next third I want you to notice a necessary clarification a necessary clarification we find it in verse 16 live as people who are free not using your freedom as a cover up for evil but living as servants of God do you see what he's doing do you see the clarification he's making here in verse 13 he tells us that we are subject in verse 16 he tells us we are free but we are free because we're a different kind of servant he says in verse 16 we're free because we're servants of God now again Peter's intent is not to provide a comprehensive treatise on this it's not what he's doing we shouldn't expect every question to be answered here we go to other texts for that but he does provide a really helpful clarification though we are subject for the

[29:37] Lord's sake to every human authority we are to live as people who are free in other words human authority is not our final authority and there are times when we are free in Christ to rebel against it why because we are first and foremost servants of the living God he no pun intended trumps the emperor Nero may have been the emperor but he wasn't Peter's lord and as citizens we must honor the rule of law but as Christians we must prioritize the law of God over and above human law therefore in any circumstance in which obedience to civil authority means disobedience to God Christians are not only free to rebel but we must

rebel after all it was

Peter himself who after being commanded to stop preaching the gospel said in Acts 5:29 we must obey God rather than men in other words he told the Jewish leaders who finally let him out of prison after they beat him up real good he said listen we're not here to make things hard for you we're here to preach the gospel that's what God has sent us to do that's what we will do and we don't care if you don't like that we will obey him more than we will obey you but this clarification comes with a warning doesn't it the warning is that we are to live as free in Christ only we are not to use that freedom as a cover up for evil ourselves I think there's two essential applications to this warning the first one is this do not attempt to use your faith or the scriptures to justify what is really just your own rebellious heart do not attempt to cover up the rebellion in your own heart as if it's

God's fault woe to the one who twists the scriptures to circumvent God's command to obey the rule of law your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit is addressing sexual immorality not mask mandates if you don't want to wear a mask you can take that up with the authority but don't say God told you you can't wear a mask love your neighbor as yourself is not a justification for illegal immigration oh no one anything doesn't mean you shouldn't pay taxes Jesus himself said render under Caesar that which is

Caesar's and give to God that which is God's the warning is yes you are free in Christ but let's make sure if we are to rebel that we're using the scriptures properly and not just trying to cover up our own spirit of rebellion that is so prevalent in our nation's history as Americans we revel in that don't we there is a spirit of rebellion that exists in the American history it's kind of in our nature that we recognize that we will stand against tyranny in all forms I love that about our heritage Peter does not justify that on the basis of a Christian principle here we do not twist the scriptures as a cover up for just our own sense of wanting to stand in solidarity with

Americans gone by who have stood against their government we need to understand that the second application of this do not use the wickedness of the state and it is often wicked we see it every day don't use that wickedness to justify your own sinful response to it it is possible to make the right stand the wrong way for example I'm so grateful as I said for what Sarah has been doing and she's really spearheaded this whole thing with linking up in a partnership with the pregnancy center I'm so grateful for that the reason I'm grateful for that is because Christians must stand against the evils of abortion more than 60 million babies have been murdered legally in the [35:05] United States since 1973 that should outrage us we should demand that it be abolished maybe even criminalized however we do not have the right to bomb an abortion clinic or set fire to Planned Parenthood or to harass and harm those who disagree with us on this issue our freedom in Christ is not a license to do evil ourselves we stand for truth we stand against sin but we cannot justify or use the wickedness of the state to justify our own sinful disobedience that's just one way we can apply it there's many ways we can apply that but to be sure human authorities are lesser authorities than Christ but they do still have true authority in God's design he commands that we honor and obey the rule of law in so far as it does not prevent us from truly honoring and obeying him but whenever submitting to the king means sinning against

God we must live as servants of God because that's who we are at the end of the day we do not belong to this world we belong to a different kingdom and we are awaiting the fullness of that kingdom this world is not our home and whenever our time here becomes a contradiction to what we know we must do to please our God we will happily live free in Christ as a servant of God fourth and finally we have a final summary in verse 17 and I love the way that Peter kind of ties off this category before he moves on honor everyone he says notice the contrast but love the brotherhood honor the emperor fear God he gives us these short little pithy rhythmic statements no doubt with an intent to give us something easily remembered we may not memorize this whole passage but that's pretty easy to remember honor everyone love the brotherhood fear

God honor the emperor we can remember that so when we're at work the next day or when we're at this thing or that thing and we're presented with this opportunity we must ask the question what does it mean for me to represent Christ now and we can remind ourselves honor everyone love the brothers fear God honor!

the emperor! honor honor and respect as image bearers with an inerrant dignity we are to love in a special way God's people do not let this contrast be lost on you this is now repeated a number of times in the first half of Peter's letter don't let it slide by yes every human has an errant dignity that must be loved respected honored but there is a special love that you are to have for one another a special loyalty that you are to have to the people of God and in the same way he says we are to demonstrate honor and respect for those whom God has providentially placed over us in the public sphere our fear and worship belong to

God and to God alone Jesus said do not fear those who can destroy the body fear the one who has the power to destroy both body and soul our fear is reserved for God and God alone we will honor and respect those he puts over us in this world but not to sacrifice our duty to him David Helm I love this write it down memorize it this is so good David Helm said submission defines the Christian's ways because being like the Savior describes the Christian's goal submission defines the Christian's way of life because being like Jesus describes the Christian's goal that's what this is about it's not submission for submission's sake and let's not forget just how

[40:12] Jesus modeled this very submission think about it teenagers who are in the room today I know the kids are out but the teenagers in the room you know why you must obey your parents fundamentally because Jesus obeyed his and if you're a Christian your goal is to be like Jesus and think about what that took Joseph and Mary were created by Jesus and Jesus humbly submitted to their parentage if the creator of this world Ashlyn humbled himself before Joseph and Mary surely you can humble yourself to the mom and dad that God has given you how else did Jesus do this well he certainly did it in the way that we have just seen in first Peter didn't he the king of kings submitted himself to the rule of law he wasn't an insurrectionist the Jews wanted him to be he wasn't he boldly spoke the truth against the corruption of human leaders there is no shortage of conflict between he and the

Pharisees and the gospels on occasion he even referenced Herod the Roman ruler of the time whoever Rome Rome had put there to rule over his area he honored them he respected the rule of law as a citizen the king of kings even when their wickedness led to his murder he did not sin he prayed for the father's mercy on them he willingly subjected himself to this corruption bringing about the greatest good the world has ever known the eternal salvation of sinners submission is the Christian's way because being like Jesus is the Christian's goal since our

Lord lived this way so must we but there's another piece to this isn't there we can look around with tremendous discouragement and outrage at the condition of our world but we know that it will not ultimately get better it ebbs and flows sure it's not really going to be better no matter who's in office why do we know that because we're sinners and there is no one who will fill the offices of our nation and of our town who isn't a sinner but there is one who is not a sinner who reigns over all we belong to his kingdom and we await his kingdom we can suffer here with joy because we know something far greater is coming the world does not know that they must labor and fight now that's the only hope they think they have we know different there is something far greater coming it is the kingdom of God

Jesus will return his kingdom will come in his fullness his perfect reign will cover the entire world and it is breaking through even now it isn't here yet but it's coming and we know it's coming because we see it in his people the true citizens are the kingdom are making it visible even as they follow Christ's example and proper submission that's what it means to thrive in exile thriving in exile is not about ease it's not about comfort it's not about pleasure it's not about your happiness thriving in exile is about following Jesus as we await his return and this is part of how we'll do it