

## **First Peter No. 14 “Loyal Citizens”**

**1 Peter 2:13-17**

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Peter has given us in vv. 11-12 a general introduction to this next section of the letter and we have looked at that introduction in some detail. Now we enter the main section itself which is like a number of other passages in the NT letters. Here Christians of different stations or relations in life are given instruction as to their particular duty to God and man. This form of ethical instruction in which duties are adapted to particular classes of people (citizens, husbands, wives, parents, children, etc.) was, by this time a convention in both Stoic philosophy and Jewish ethical writing. The Christian writers simply adapted a conventional form for their own use, modifying the ethical teaching to conform to Christian theology and adding the appropriate Christian motivation.

### **Text Comment**

v.13 The ESV’s “submit yourselves to every human institution” is doubtful. The word translated “human institution” is the word that everywhere else in the NT means “creation” or “creature.” There is no other use of it anywhere in the literature of the period that suggests that it should be translated “human institution.” The simple reading would be “be subject for the Lord’s sake, to every human creature” or, in colloquial English, “be subject to everyone.” What we have, then, is a statement that introduces not just the next four verses but the next several paragraphs. In each case Peter urges Christians in specific circumstances to be subject to someone. You will see this at 2:18 and 3:1. The Christian life, he is saying, must not be a life of self-assertion or the exploitation of others, but of the unusually, distinctively, radically, voluntary submission of oneself to others. Paul, if you remember, begins a similar section in Ephesians 5 by telling his readers to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” and then identifies the particular submission required of different groups of Christians.

Passing from the general to the particular in the middle of v. 13, Peter begins the application of the general principle of submission by saying that this principle of submission should mark the Christian’s behavior toward the state. The word translated “emperor” here, literally “king as supreme authority,” is taken by almost all commentators as a reference to the Roman emperor.

The issue of a believer’s attitude toward human government is raised a number of times in the Bible and that itself is evidence that the subject was controversial and ripe for confusion. Christians in the years following Pentecost had very soon been subjected to pressure and then outright persecution by various governments. This was not a theoretical matter. Peter had himself been arrested on more than one occasion on account of his work as an apostle of Jesus Christ. There had been persecutions of Christians as a class in various cities of the empire, often, at this early stage, at the instigation of Jews. More to the point, the Christians Peter was writing to were themselves suffering some active persecution, though we are unable to say precisely what the persecution consisted in or from what quarter it came. It seems to have been persecution of a local variety, rather than some form of imperial oppression. Still, it may well be that the government was giving

aid and comfort to the enemies of the church or, at least, the government was providing no protection for them.

But there was a further problem. The faith of Christians in God as the supreme ruler of the world tended to make Christians look down on merely human governments, all the more of the government of the Roman world, which had a custom of deifying the often silly men who occupied the imperial throne. What is more, the sense they had of themselves as aliens and pilgrims in this world tended to make them consider the political interests of the empire unimportant and irrelevant to them. And, the high ethical life to which they had given themselves tended to make them look with disgust on the immoral, corrupt, and cruel regimes that they encountered in the Roman world. Peter refers to this in v. 16 where he imagines a Christian thinking that the freedom he has in Christ liberates him from the need to be subject to an unbelieving government.

Peter's argument, as you can see, is very like the argument we find in Paul's letters, especially in Romans 13. Governments are from God. They serve to protect and foster public order, punishing wrongdoers and rewarding good conduct. Christians are obliged to give them obedience and respect, for, in doing so, they are honoring God who appointed such government. So, he says, their submission to the government was to be offered *for the Lord's sake*.

You are aware, of course, that there is another side to this story. A lawfully constituted government once told Peter not to preach Christ and he told the representatives of that government, point blank, that he had to obey God rather than man. There are limitations to the loyalty of Christians to their earthly government, just as there are many cases when governments do the reverse of punishing wickedness and rewarding virtue. The martyrs are a grim demonstration of that, though there is more than enough evidence that governments are hardly always, perhaps it would be better to say that they are only rarely righteous. If we want the demonstration of that we have only to open and begin reading our daily newspapers. Still that is not Peter's point here. And it is his teaching here that concerns us. Here he tells a community of Christians, a community that may well have had reasons to regard their government as an enemy, to show it respect nevertheless and render it obedience. It doesn't mean that one must approve of what the government does in every case or even most cases. Assyria and Babylon were long before referred to as God's "servants" because they served as the unwitting instruments of God's punishment of Israel and Judah who had rebelled against the Lord. But they rendered that service in a way that was itself evil and subsequently were themselves punished by God. One could appreciate the role Assyria and Babylon played without approving of their conduct and certainly without enthusiastically embracing their citizenship! No Jew in exile in Babylon was likely ever to think or say of the government that now ruled his life, as too many Americans have said of theirs, "My country right or wrong."

In a similar way, without any intention on its part to honor the living God, the Roman imperial government ensured a measure of public order and that was no small thing. Paul, in 1 Timothy 2, speaks of the great importance to the church of Christians being able to live peaceful and quiet lives. The so-called *pax Romana* – the Roman peace – made it possible for the gospel to spread in every direction from the Holy Land. Paul could travel by sea without fear of pirates, as would not have been true less than a century before. He could appeal to his Roman citizenship when assailed by a mob, as sometimes happened. He could expect to be acquitted in a Roman court as happened

after the end of the Book of Acts. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries we have many times been reminded of the bitter truth that no government is typically much worse than bad government.

*These are verses that for long years American Christians read with little personal interest. Our government, so we thought, was our friend, our defender. Through long years of American history it often spoke as if it were a defender of Christendom. I read recently a short history of our young country's contest with and eventual conquest of the Barbary pirates of North Africa in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Regularly in that time government officials referred to their citizens as "Christians" and their obligation as that of rescuing imprisoned "Christians."*

But, of course, through these centuries and for centuries before many Christians did not think about their government as a friend and protector of the faith. They felt the full force of these verses and staggered under the obligation of submission that Peter taught them here. Their states did and in many cases still do pose an existential threat to their lives and freedom. It is not a small matter to them to hear Peter speak of their obligations to respect the government for the Lord's sake, that is, that such submission is a sacred duty for Christians. There are a huge number of Christians around the world who have been imprisoned for their faith, tortured, humiliated, impoverished, their families threatened, simply because they are followers of Jesus Christ. *For such people Peter's words must leap off the page!* Take note, both Peter and Paul, the two Apostles who speak most directly to the obligation of Christians to submit to and to honor the state, were both jailed by the state and were both executed by the state, the very government that Peter here orders his readers to honor and obey.

When I began my pastorate here forty years ago, the congregation was largely older. These were people who had been adults during the Second World War. They had a deeply emotional attachment to the very idea of the United States of America. When I arrived, an American flag stood proudly behind and to one side of the pulpit. Several times I preached on a text like this one, reminding them that as Christians they were to have a different attitude to their state, to their government than unbelievers; reminding them that no human government will long remain a true friend of the Christian faith. I would remind them that patriotism, as we think of it, a deep, impassioned love of and loyalty to country cannot be found in the Bible, certainly not a country such as the USA. Those sermons were controversial, produced some real offense, and I learned that I had to tread carefully when this subject was raised in a sermon. A few years after my coming I removed the American flag from the east end of the church. But no matter where I put it, the janitor would find it and put it back. The session finally decided to remove it officially and it fell to me to return it to the army general who had donated it to the church years before. They never told me how to do *that* in seminary!

To be sure, our situation in the United States today is not yet to be compared to what hundreds of millions of other Christians face, but it is apparent to any thoughtful Christian that evangelical Christians in the United States have had to begin thinking and speaking about government and the church's relationship to it over these last forty years in a way American Christians never thought or spoke before. Now our government is the defender of abortion and a great many other practices that are directly contrary to the teaching of the Word of God. Before the recent presidential election, the Board of Trustees of our Covenant College was working hard and quickly to address the likely consequence of the election of Mrs. Clinton. We expected that within a year or so

students at Covenant would no longer qualify for government grants and, perhaps, for government backed student loans because of the College's position on sexual ethics. Was anyone thinking, forty years ago, that Christian institutions would be singled out for punishment, ostracism, and public disdain because they hew a biblical line regarding human sexuality?

And did you know that there are PCA churches that condone non-payment of taxes on the grounds that the government is now the enemy of God? Some years ago I had some correspondence with a young man who was looking for a ministry in our denomination. He was a graduate of one of our Reformed seminaries and the son of one of our churches back east. He had been telling me about the views of people and churches that he met when a candidate for various pulpits in our Presbyterian Church in America. In one of those churches he had been disturbed to hear one of the elders tell him outright that he lies on his income tax return because does not owe the government the truth and the government has no right to take so much of his income in taxes. It used to be that people who withheld their taxes, at least those who did so publicly, did so to protest the government's ownership of nuclear weapons or its involvement in a foreign war. But more and more nowadays it is professed evangelical Christians who withhold their taxes, usually not publicly, which, of course, also requires their lying, because they regard the government, by its conduct, as an enemy of the Christian faith.

Here is a very practical question of Christian ethics and it is addressed squarely by Peter's remarks here and other teaching in the NT. Jesus paid his taxes even though some of that tax revenue, after it had made its way into the imperial treasury, would eventually make its way back to Judea to pay for the occupation of his homeland or would be used to build a temple to Diana in Ephesus. Paul, in Romans 13:6, ordered the Christians in Rome to pay their taxes to the corrupt and cruel government of Nero, perhaps the very king Peter is referring to in verses 13 and 17. If Jesus paid taxes to a pagan government that killed his disciples, brothers and sisters, you and I are to pay our taxes, all of them and with scrupulous fidelity to the law. *The one thing the government that hates Christians ought to be able to say, "I wish everybody else in the country paid their taxes as faithfully as do the followers of Jesus Christ."*

But there is something more here for all of us, more general, more personal, and even more practical. It concerns the way in which our Christian faith alters our perspective on life, our attitude toward the world. For Peter is not, in the first place, concerned to answer specific questions Christians might have regarding their relationship to the government and their obligation to obey the civil authority. He is interested rather in our outlook on life. Government is but one of the contexts in which he works this out. Employment and marriage will be two others. What he wants from us, what the Holy Spirit wants from us, is an attitude toward life in this world, toward relationships of various kinds, toward other human beings, that is profoundly, obviously, powerfully shaped and determined by the kind of spiritual detachment appropriate to people who are strangers and pilgrims in this world and who are living not for anything they will obtain in this world but for the glory of God – what he has just said in the verses preceding the text we have read.

Christians can fail to live in keeping with their faith in different ways. Even in their attitude to human government and civil authority we can detect real faith or the lack of it. In the churches in which I was raised and in the days of my upbringing we failed at this, we failed to have the mind of

Christ regarding government as Peter describes it here. Our problem was the reverse of that faced by those to whom Peter was writing. In our day we were all patriots and felt deeply that *American patriotism was a Christian duty*. You know what patriotism is. Patriotism is a zealous loyalty to one's country and support of one's country, especially in matters involving other countries. It is a nationalistic fervor, a heartfelt preference for one's own country and a conviction that it is morally superior to other countries.

Well, as I said, there is nothing like that in the Bible. Believe me, Peter never organized patriotic worship services in the churches of Pontus, Galatia, and Cappadocia, as you find in many PCA churches, especially in the American south. He never spent his time trying to convince others that "Rome is the greatest empire on God's green earth" and was never caught saying "My empire right or wrong" or "Rome: love it or leave it;" or, even, later in Rome when about to be crucified upside down, "I regret that I have but one life to lose for Rome." Nor did he ever sing the Hank Williams Jr. song:

Rome may have stumbled, but she ain't never fell;  
And if the Russians don't believe that, they can all go straight to hell.

We thought about our nation and our government in those days in ways that now seem very quaint, if not positively stupid. What Christian with a Bible in his or her hand could ever have supposed that a democratic government was going to be holy, just, and always good? But it seemed to us then that American institutions were clearly the pinnacle of human political development. That is what we were taught in our public schools. We couldn't believe that intelligent people in other countries did not immediately recognize our superiority. Of course, even we don't imagine such things today, just forty years later. Now, of course, we look at those same institutions with a jaundiced eye. What difference a few years can make. Is there anyone, anywhere who thinks that the American Congress or the American courts or the American presidency are the solution to the problems of the world? The world certainly doesn't think any such thing, and nowadays few American's do either. Like Assyria, Babylon, and Rome before her, America has served a purpose in the Lord's plan, and, if Christ should tarry, embracing evil with ever greater relish she too will fall under divine judgment and be destroyed.

We American Christians violated Peter's commandment not by a lack of respect but by too much respect, not by too low a view of our institutions of government but by too high a view of them. In those days we despised tax protesters, because they were all liberals who didn't want to fund the defense budget. Now, strange to see, it is some of our own people who are arguing against paying the taxes owed because of the illegitimacy of our government. Peter has nothing to say that comes near to amounting to patriotism, nor does any other biblical author. The only such patriotism the Bible knows is the love and the zeal that God's people have and are to have for the kingdom of God, the church of Christ. We are certainly to be grateful for the blessings that God gives us through our country. We are certainly to be faithful citizens, working for the best of our land and its people, as Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon to do. But we are to remember that what Peter says about the Christian's duty to the government applies equally to the American Christian, the Russian Christian, the Sudanese Christian, the Chinese Christian, and the Iraqi Christian. There are too many American Christians who still today take offense at this. They are sure they can find

something in the Bible that justifies a zealotry for their nation and its institutions, but I challenge them to find it.

Peter's view of government is much less romantic and much more theological and practical. God has established governments to keep the peace, they foster order. That is very important. Nations and their institutions are not, however, in Peter's teaching, to be objects of our trust or of our devotion. We don't have that much devotion, you and I. We can't afford to squander our capacity for devotion on things that don't deserve it. Our devotion needs to go where it belongs. Nations and their institutions are not to be the subject of our trust or our devotion. Of course not. America is no more our home for Christians today than Rome, or Pontus, or Galatia was the home of those Christians in Peter's day. Peter began his letter, you remember, "To God's elect, strangers in the world" and, just before taking up this matter of government, he said it again in 2:11. Christians are aliens and strangers in the world.

In other words, what Peter is telling us here is that the nation in which we live, the government under which we live is but part of the environment in which we Christians are to live our lives and show our mettle. Christians are to have a genuine, spiritual detachment from the things that belong only to this world so that we can be entirely devoted to that which lasts and counts forever. That's true of the government officer, that's true of the military man or woman, that's true of every Christian citizen. And the things that do belong to this world – whether government or employment or whatever – important in their own ways of course, are chiefly important for the Christian as environments in which they are to walk with God, demonstrate the reality of the gospel, commend Christ and his salvation to others, and serve others in his name. Through the centuries and today this is what faithful Christians have done: Christians in government, Christians in the military, Christians in business. Their calling was to serve God by serving others in that way made possible by their calling. But take the point. The way a Christian is to live is to be the demonstration of higher things – neither a craven fear of government nor a repudiation of it – but as another of the contexts in which they might live before men a life of purity, holiness, love, and consideration for other human beings. A place for doing good. A place for serving God. Governments themselves are of relatively minor importance. They serve the function of the public good, but they come and go, and they belong only to a world which is passing away. Nothing they do or can do effects the eternal destiny of men. But, they provide a way for Christians to demonstrate their faith, give glory to God, and to love their neighbor. It is for pagans to whine about taxes; it is for Christians to show respect and to pay what is due – however onerous the burden – because taxes and money are not the things that matter to someone who is on his way to another country and who there will be wealthy beyond our power to describe! Taxes are things about which Christians may demonstrate a cheerful unconcern.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with Oswald Chambers. Some of you may know him only through the collection of excerpts from his writings, edited posthumously by his wife, *My Utmost for His Highest*. It is one of the Christian classics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chambers was born in Scotland in the home of a pastor, attributed either his conversion or the formal beginning of his serious Christian discipleship to a sermon he heard preached by Charles Spurgeon, was educated in London and, later, Edinburgh, where he often listened to the preaching of Alexander Whyte, was an itinerant preacher and teacher for most of his adult life, with stints in both Japan and the United States, for some time he was director of a small Bible College in London, and, finally, he spent the

last three and a half years of his life in Egypt during the First World War, where under the auspices of the YMCA he provided physical and spiritual care to the troops stationed near Cairo or convalescing in the nearby hospitals after action in the Mediterranean theater of the war. J. Gresham Machen, interestingly, at the same time did the very same thing, but in France and Belgium, not Egypt. Chambers died in Cairo, in November of 1917, from complications following surgery for appendicitis. He was 43. He was known and loved at his death by the company of people whom he had influenced for Christ and for good, though the circle of his influence was then relatively small. But through his writings, collected and published by his wife through the years following his death, his influence became much greater.

His was an extraordinary life. Chambers was a man of deep devotion to Christ and to Christ's cause, a man of simple and powerful faith. He wasn't the deepest thinker in the world, but his words still today communicate the passion that ought to fill the heart of anyone who has been given the immeasurable privilege of knowing Jesus Christ. Now how does the life of Oswald Chambers bear on Peter's exhortation regarding submission to the King? In just this way. What I found in the life of his great man was exactly the spirit that Peter is after in these few verses we have read. If I could characterize it, I would do so this way. Chambers was a grand example of that cheerful unconcern with worldly principles, powers, and institutions. Chambers was a pilgrim. The world was simply the place he walked through while serving God and his neighbor. The nations of the world were simply peoples to be loved and served in Christ's name. The character of his life was determined not by the fact that he was a citizen of Great Britain but by the fact that he was an inhabitant of the kingdom of God and a servant of its King.

He was profligate in charity and hospitality. He lived his life on the contributions of others and gave what he had to everyone. He never owned a home or an automobile. "Give to all who ask and the Lord will take care of you" was his motto. And he who had nothing was generous, some said, to a fault. And the great theme of his life was that of complete dependence upon the Lord enabling a complete consecration of one's life to the Lord. "Be absolutely His" was a characteristic encouragement he would include in letters to friends.

Well that is Peter's idea, really, here. "Be absolutely His!" In regard to the government of our land or any land we are to think and to say, "I am absolutely Christ's!" "If I honor you it will be because Christ directs me to. If I disobey you and suffer your punishment, it will be because I am Christ's first and foremost!" Whether you are thinking about government, employment, even marriage. "Be absolutely His!" Politics, governments, nations, they come and go. They are not the meaning of life. They have a role to play that may be of some importance in its own way. Keeping the peace, preserving order, punishing evil, etc. But, mainly, they are just another context in which and before which Christians can live out their life trusting God and serving God. This brief, shining moment, our life in this world, is our only opportunity by faith to love and serve the Lord who gave himself for us. That conviction is what is to determine a Christian's attitude to this world.

You get a tax bill. It is larger than you thought. So what! Is God no longer on his throne? Can you no longer live the Christian life? Is God unable to provide because the IRS has emptied his treasury? Such thoughts are ridiculous. And it is exactly the same if it is not a tax bill, but a knock on the door that will lead you to prison for your loyalty to Christ. In the darkest dungeon you remain the freest man on earth and the heir to the greatest fortune that can be conceived. At the

last, all the cruelest, the most unjust government can do to a Christian is to give him another opportunity to trust the Lord and prove him faithful, to serve the Lord and raise a witness to his name and power. Human governments pretend to have power but the most they can do is kill us and so send us to heaven.

Chambers was buried in a cemetery in Cairo, Egypt, of all places. But that was where the Lord had taken him and put him to use. But, then, what difference does that make. He was a Christian in every significant way. He was British in the ways that matter least and only very temporarily. His Father in heaven owns the entire earth, is the Creator of all nations and peoples. His children can rest and await the resurrection anywhere in his dominions. And that is a good way to put the point. It should matter very little to you where you are buried, so long as that cemetery is found alongside the pilgrim road. "Be absolutely his!"