

God and Caesar

By David H. Roper

I have some hard things which must be said today. They need to be said because the apostle Peter says them. You may not agree with some of what I say, but we will have to agree to love each other and start from there. The subject is the relationship of the Christian to civil government, particularly to the kind of government we are experiencing today, in which there is corruption and evil in high places. What should our reaction be as Christians? Peter has a very insightful word on this subject, and certainly so, because it is from the Lord.

We have come to the end of the first section of 1 Peter. In it Peter has been dealing with our destiny--sure salvation. We have an inheritance which is undefiled, unfading, reserved in heaven for us. I heard an interview a number of years back with Jim Kaat, the professional baseball player. He was asked how his Christian faith related to his career in sports. He told of an incident that had taken place a couple of weeks earlier. He was pitching, the game was tied, it was the bottom of the ninth inning, the bases were loaded, there were two outs, and he had a full count on the batter. And as he looked around at the base runners and down at the catcher, the thought went through his mind, "I'm glad that my destiny is not riding on this next pitch!"

Now, that is a helpful thought--to know that our destiny has already been determined! Once we have placed our faith in Jesus Christ and he has become Lord, we are secure, we are safe. We are "guarded through faith unto salvation." as Peter tells us. Or to use the richly expressive image Jesus uses in John 10, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give eternal life to them; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand." That is a great word! We are secure, our destiny is fixed. Once we have decided to make Jesus Christ Lord, no other decision can affect that basic relationship.

From our destiny, Peter moves on to our duty in chapter 2, verse 11 through chapter 3, verse 12. Our duty is submission. The idea of submission is underscored a number of times, and different relationships in which submission is required are pointed out to us. In verse 13 we are told to submit ourselves as citizens to our civil government, in verse 18 to submit as employees, and beginning with chapter 3, verse 1 submission in the home is in view. The foundational principle is found in verses 11 and 12 of chapter 2, and it governs Peter's discussion throughout the rest of this section. He writes,

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

His appeal is based on the temporary nature of our life in the here and now. We have a very transient, ephemeral, short-lived stay on this planet. In the words of the spiritual, "This world is not our home, we're just passing through. Our treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue." Ultimate reality for us--the things which really count--is not in the here and now; our life here is transitory. Peter uses two terms to describe this relationship. He says we are both aliens and strangers. The Greek word translated "aliens" is much like our English word, and refers to people who do not possess the legal rights of citizens. The word translated "strangers", or "exiles" in the Revised Standard Version, is akin to our word "transients". A transient is someone who has no permanent residence. If you have ever been in the Armed Forces you know what a transients' barracks is; that is where they put you while you are waiting for a permanent duty station. And Peter says that is what we are. We are transients, exiles, aliens; we have no legal status in the here and now. "Our citizenship is in heaven," to use Paul's phrase.

Because we have this kind of relationship to the world here and now, Peter issues two commands-- one found in verse 11, one in verse 12; one negative, one positive. "Abstain from fleshly lusts," is the first imperative; "Keep your behavior excellent," or as the RSV translates it, "Maintain good conduct," is the second. I prefer the RSV translation, because it is closer to the way Peter actually expresses it. Peter literally says, "Hold off fleshly lusts" "Hold on to good conduct." So there are both a negative and a positive side of our duty.

The first command is to abstain from fleshly lusts which, Peter says, war against the soul. We are inclined to identify fleshly lusts with sexual lusts, because "lust", in the English language, is almost always used that way. But Peter's term is much broader. He is not referring merely to sexual desires but to any strong passion which may arise from the body, or from the soul, i.e., the mind, emotions, and will. In this present context, since he is talking about submission, I believe he is referring to the tendency we have in the flesh to assert ourselves, to insist we receive what is legally and rightfully ours.

You know the feeling. When we have been defrauded, or someone has treated us unjustly, we rant and rave and jump about and insist that people give us what is legally, rightfully ours! We want our rights! We insist upon our rights! Peter says this is the sort of fleshly passion which wages war against our soul. And that is precisely what it does. It makes terrible inroads into our personality, causes us to disintegrate as people, to be filled with resentment and bitterness and ugliness of spirit. If we can't have our rights, then we are going to let people know about it! Peter says to abstain from that sort of passion--that passion to have your way, to insist upon your rights, and to get what's yours--because it will destroy your soul.

Jesus said, "If a man wants to lose his life, let him try to save it; if a man wants to save his life, let him lose it for my sake." That is, when we get protective and defensive about our life, and insist that everyone treat us in a way which is "right", we will lose our life. But if we are willing to fling away our life, forget ourselves, not hold our rights dearly, then we will find ourselves. Jesus will fight for us, he will defend us, as chapter 2 tells us. When Jesus was unjustly treated, he committed himself to the One who judges justly. He did not try to defend himself; he let God defend him.

Now, it is true that we have rights. We have rights guaranteed us in the Constitution; we have personal rights as individuals. And certainly we should stand up for right--for right principles. We should never stand by and allow others' rights to be denied them. When others are exploited, we must stand up for them. But we should hold our own personal rights loosely, and never insist upon them. We may ask for them, but we can never insist that other people treat us the "right" way, because we are aliens. We really have no right to insist upon our rights. "Hold them loosely," Peter says. "Let God fight for you. Do not get defensive and self-justifying, and do not allow those passions to rule in your life, because they will destroy your soul. They will make you a wizened, barren, little person. Forego your rights, abstain from these fleshly lusts which war against the soul."

That is the negative side. The positive side is to maintain good conduct. The word which is twice translated "good" in the RSV -- "good conduct", and "good deeds" -- is a term meaning not merely virtue, but beauty, winsomeness. Peter is saying, "In the face of opposition and unjust treatment, be winsome. Let the graciousness of our Lord display itself in your life. That is the best defense you have. The thing which best will answer your detractors is your gracious spirit. God will work through that not only to defend you, but to draw them to himself." Shakespeare has Othello say of Cassio,

He hath a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly.

You see, when we react to injustice and cruelty and violence with graciousness and love and compassion, others look at us and see that there must be something in our life, something far more than can be explained merely in terms of our own personality. Remember the words of the centurion at the foot of the cross. He had seen Jesus dragged through a kangaroo court, subjected to every unjust court procedure he could have experienced--there was absolutely nothing legal about that trial--and yet not one murmur slipped from his lips. He never reviled, he did not react in a defensive, self-justifying way; he let God defend him. And this hardened old Roman soldier, as he

stood at the foot of the cross, said, "Surely this is a son of God." He was not making a theological statement. He did not say "This is the Son of God,"--the one Jesus claimed to be. He said, "This is a son of God. There is something in his life which can't be explained merely in terms of his manhood. God must be in that man! He is a son of God."

And that is what people will say about you and me, if we react the right way to injustice. "Therefore," Peter says, "maintain that quiet exhibition of grace, the beauty of Christ, no matter what people are saying about you, or what they are doing to you. And the result will be that their charges will be disproved, and they themselves will be drawn to the Lord. They will glorify him."

Do you know what Christians were being accused of, at this point in history? There are a number of accounts by Roman historians and Roman officials which describe those charges. Tacitus, an early Roman historian, says the Christians were guilty of "a sullen hatred of the human race", i.e., gross, antisocial acts. The Roman authorities do not spell these out, but the Christian apologists who wrote in the early second century did. There is an early account by a man known as Justin Martyr, who wrote to the Roman Emperor a defense of the activities of Christians. In describing the sorts of things Christians were accused of doing, this is what he said:

It was asserted, "...that a newborn infant, entirely covered over with flour, was presented, like some mystic symbol of initiation, to the knife of the proselyte, who unknowingly inflicted many a secret and mortal wound on that innocent victim of his error..." It was as confidently affirmed that this inhuman sacrifice was succeeded by a suitable entertainment, in which intemperance served as a provocative to brutal lust; till, at the appointed moment, the lights were suddenly extinguished, shame was banished, nature was forgotten; and, as accident might direct, the darkness of the night was polluted by the incestuous commerce of sisters and brothers, of sons and mothers."

The early Christians were accused of murder, human sacrifice, incest--every gross and vile immoral act. Now put yourself in their shoes. Suppose your neighbors thought you attended church in order to participate in a murderous, incestuous, drunken orgy. After church you would return home, knowing that they were staring at you out of their windows as you walked up the driveway, their children, out in the front yards, watching with wide-eyed wonderment! That is what the Romans were saying about Christians. You can imagine the tendency to react defensively and get resentful and rebellious and ugly in spirit.

Now, there is nothing wrong with Christians' trying to educate the non-Christian world. The early Christians did this by publishing tracts. This particular quotation is taken from a tract written to the Roman Emperor. It is right for Christians to explain themselves, and to attempt to communicate. But what Peter is saying is, "Having done that, if you are still misunderstood, then accept it. Do not get defensive, do not get bitter, do not get ugly about it; let God defend you." And you know, it is one of the interesting facts of history that, within a few years, the actions of the first-century Christians overturned those charges. One of the early church historians, Eusebius, writing some time later, said,

...the slanderous accusations which had been brought against the whole church also vanished, and there remained our teaching alone, which has prevailed over all.... So that not one of them now ventures to affix a base calumny upon our faith, or any such slander as our ancient enemies formerly delighted to utter.

It is true that the persecutions went on, because Christians would not say that Caesar was Lord; but the charges against the Christians were overthrown. Do you know why? Because they heeded Peter's voice. They behaved in such a way that no one could believe them guilty of those perversities.

That is the challenge to us today. If you are being unjustly treated by your parents, or by your children, or your employer, or your employees, or your government--whatever sphere of activity you are in--that is the challenge: to so live that your behavior, your winsomeness, the godly character of your life, will refute their charges.

Having established this principle, Peter goes on to apply it in these various spheres of activity--as citizens, as

employees, and in the family. The principle is: injustice is met by good behavior. We read, in verses 13 and 14,

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution: whether to a king as the one in authority; or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.

The first reference here is to the emperor; the second is to lesser political figures--in this case the Roman provincial governors such as Felix, Festus, and Pontius Pilate. But it could refer to any ruler at any level of government.

Verse 15:

For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.

They were ignorant because they did not understand, they did not know the truth about the church, and so they were slandering them. And Peter says that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Verses 16 and 17:

Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

Now we are going to discuss the relationship of the Christian to civil government. Anytime you raise this subject, you shake out more snakes than you can kill! I am sure I will say things that you misunderstand, or that you disagree with, and there will be areas I will not cover. If you have questions, I encourage you to jot them down on a card, put your name and address on it, and I will be glad to correspond with you. But there are some things which seem to be obvious in this passage that I would like to state.

The first is that Christians are called to civil obedience. There is no question about this. It could not be stated more clearly. We are to submit to the authorities at every level, whether federal, state, or local -- whether we are talking about the Supreme Court or a traffic court, whether laws governing federal income tax or parking regulations, or whatever. We are to submit as a Christian obligation. This is restated again and again in Scripture -- by the apostle Paul in Romans 13, by Jesus himself when he said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." There are things which are solely God's, and therefore they cannot be given to Caesar. But Jesus is saying that Caesar has a legitimate sphere of authority, and we are to render to him the things which fall within that realm of authority. So we are to obey. Civil disobedience by Christians simply cannot be justified from Scripture.

This is true even when government is unjust. The Roman government at the time Peter wrote was anything but just. He is not saying that civil government, or any political regime, will always conform to the will of God. It does not. And Rome did not. But he is saying that at the core of all civil governments there is justice. And that is what keeps things stable. The stance that Scripture takes is that some government is better than none, that anarchy is not God's way. Revolution is not God's way, because it sets in motion terrible forces in society which will rend and destroy it. Therefore even the worst government is better than no government at all. Because we live in a fallen society, and men would otherwise devour one another, there needs to be some agency to maintain law and order and justice. And civil government provides that. Therefore, for Christians to rebel and try to overthrow the government, is to rebel against God. God has established this authority. That is a hard word. It is particularly hard when you have no respect for your government. But Peter says we are to obey, nevertheless.

There is another word in verse 13. Civil government is instituted by God. He is the one who sets in motion these forces in society. This is true on a national level; it is true on a local level. Therefore government is merely an extension both of the wrath and of the righteousness of God. Government exists to punish evildoers and to reward those who do right. That is what a just king does. In the Old Testament, God's king loved righteousness and hated iniquity. And Messiah, who would be the just King *par excellence*, is said to be One who will love righteousness and hate iniquity. That is what government ought to do. It ought to reward those who are obedient, and it ought to condemn greed and injustice and violence wherever it appears. And even the worst of governments do that to

some extent. This is God's way of dealing with the iniquity and rebellion of man.

Now, Peter tells us in this passage that civil government does not have ultimate authority in our life. We are to be bond-slaves of God, not bondslaves of Caesar. And there may come a time in our experience, as has occurred in history past, when men and women will have to disobey -- respectfully -- the state, because the laws of the state contravene some clearly stated principle of Scripture. Should there ever be a law passed in our land which prohibited something God himself commands, or should the law of our land command something God prohibits, we would have to disobey respectfully, as the apostles did in the first century when they were told not to preach the Gospel. They refused to comply. They did it graciously. They did it knowing the state had the right to punish them. But they went out on the streets and they preached. They were thrown in prison because of it, and they submitted to that, because they knew government has the right to punish those who disobey the law. But they disobeyed only because that law clearly contradicted a statement of Scripture.

Peter says we are to obey not because we are coerced, not because we are forced, but as free men. That is why Jesus said, "If they compel you to go one mile, go with them two miles." Under Roman law, a Roman soldier could command a citizen to carry his pack for one mile, and the citizen had to comply. Jesus said, "At the end of that mile, carry it another mile." Why? To show you are free. You take the initiative to act. You are not compelled to do it, you do it willingly--for your state, and for those who represent your state. We are bond-slaves only of God. We are free in regard to the laws of the country. We are aliens, yet we obey out of a sense of responsibility to the Lord. "For his sake," Peter says, "obey."

There is one thing more that Peter says. Up to this point, I think most of us would have to agree that this is what the Scriptures say. But in verse 17 Peter says, "Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king."

The first command, "Honor all men," is a principle which covers the other three. The way he expresses this term conveys the idea of an attitude which ought to pervade all of life. "Keep on honoring--make this a settled state of mind. Honor all, whether they deserve it or not." The minimum reaction, the minimum demand upon us as Christians, is to honor everyone. Why? Because they are God's creatures. They are created in his image. So they are to be respected and honored.

The next level is with the brothers and sisters--the brotherhood of believers. He says to love them. That is something closer and warmer. Honor them, yes, but as members of the family (our own personal family first, and then the family of God as an extension of that) we are to love them, too. "Love them with God's love," is the meaning of the term he uses here--God's love, a divine love. "Love them whether they are lovely or not. Love them whether they return it or not. Honor them, yes, but take the next step, too--love them."

"Fear God," Peter says. "Honor him, yes; love him, yes. And fear him -- that is the next step. Reverence him, put him in the center of all things. That is the honor due him."

And then comes the punch line: "Honor the king." You do not have to love him. And certainly you do not have to fear him in the sense that you reverence him and put him in the center of everything. But you honor him, you respect him.

Do you know who was on the throne when Peter wrote these words? The infamous Nero, the most monstrous ruler the world has ever seen. He probably was personally responsible for more murders than any other man in history, whether Hitler, or the Borgias, or anyone else. He was a cruel, vicious, amoral tyrant. He came to the throne because his mother, Agrippina, scraped and scratched to get him there, pushing aside the son of Claudius, the legal heir. Her son rewarded her by having her banished and murdered. (A nice thought on Mother's Day!) He killed Claudius' son, who was still the heir apparent. The only wise thing about his rule was that he had an elderly statesman, Seneca, as adviser. He killed Seneca. He left the government in the hands of a group of political hacks, while he went about the Roman Empire appearing in the Games and putting on musical concerts. He probably really was conducting a concert, on the theme of the fall of Troy, when Rome burned. Historians are fairly certain that he set the fire himself, although he accused the Christians, because he wanted to rebuild the city in his own honor. He took tax funds, public money, and built his own house -- "the house of gold" it was called -- a huge

place stretching all the way over the Esquiline Hill. He erected a bronze statue 100 feet tall in honor of himself. His final act was to kill himself. The senate voted his death, and he went into hiding, then took his own life. As he died, his last words were, "What an artist dies in me!" That was Nero. There is hardly anything worthwhile you can say about him.

Peter says, "Honor the king." The application is obvious. We could be filled with bitterness and resentment and hostility, and get ugly in spirit over all the corruption which has come to light this past year. "What in the world is going on there in Washington? Who do these men think they are?" God says, "Honor them." There may be some legal process which can be carried out to remove them, and this is right and proper in our society. We do not live in a totalitarian state, as Peter did. But behind all of this, you see, is the gracious attitude of Christians who honor our leaders as men who have been placed in their positions by God. God put Pharaoh on the throne -- he said so. God raised up Cyrus, that terrible scourge of the nation of Israel. He said he did. God raised up Nebuchadnezzar. He raised up the men in our government; they are there for a purpose. Legal action may have to be taken against them. But in the meantime we are to honor and respect them. And no matter how unjustly we are treated, we are to obey.

And we are to demonstrate personal righteousness. The Scriptures say to pray for those who are in authority. Have we prayed for them lately? We are to demonstrate at every level a personal righteousness--in the PTA, in the city council, and in our neighborhood--both to live out and to speak out the truth about Jesus Christ. That is what will change society, not our anger. It is not the wrath of man which accomplishes the righteousness of God, but the quiet infusion of godly behavior at every level of life, as Christians go about their business, gently and quietly and courageously living out the truth of Jesus Christ, and proclaiming this righteousness to others. It is righteousness which exalts a nation. We must never forget that. This is the challenge Peter leaves with us today.

Father, forgive us for the bitterness of spirit we exhibit so frequently, the hostility and meanness of heart which controls us and makes us speak against those you have placed in authority over us. Deliver us, Lord, and make us truly righteous men and women, boys and girls. Wherever we are, Father, we ask that the winsomeness of our life will draw men to Jesus Christ, and that our society might genuinely be changed, as we who constitute the church act as you have determined that we should act. We know it is only by your grace that this can be accomplished, and so we thank you for giving yourself to us, in Christ's name, Amen.

Title: God and Caesar
By: David H. Roper
Series: Tried by Fire
Scripture: 1 Peter 2:11-17
Message No: 5 of 7
Catalog No: 3245
Date: May 12, 1974
Updated September 10, 2000.

[Back to Index Page for David Roper](#)
[Peninsula Bible Church Home Page](#)

Copyright © 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.