

“REFLECTIONS ON GOVERNMENT AUTHORITY.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

May 17, 2020, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: I Peter 2:11-17

Prayer: Holy Father, cause the proclamation of your Word to bear much fruit for your glory and for the spiritual benefit of our souls, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Introduction.

Today is the 20th Sunday of 2020. This is our 10th Sunday out of our sanctuaries, the same number we were in at the beginning of the year.

There is an ancient curse, “May you live in interesting times.” Well, we undeniably are living in interesting times and they are definitely starting to feel like a curse. The novelty has certainly worn off this so-called novel coronavirus.

You can hear the increasing annoyance and frustration, people chafing under the restraints. We see it on the news with protests and rallies and lawsuits and people defying orders. We are all wanting to resume corporate worship and wondering when that can happen.

In the light of this growing angst toward those in authority I want to reflect with you this morning what Scripture has to say about government authority. It is not my intention to whack the beehive, but to give us some clarity and guidance as we seek to manage our thoughts, actions and emotions in these interesting times.

Our text this morning is one of the two principle passages in NT on this topic, the other one being Romans 13. I commend both of these to you for your continued study, reflection and prayer.

I Peter

Both I Peter and Romans were written during the rule and reign of Nero Claudius Caesar who ruled from 54 to 68 AD. Nero was perhaps the worst of all the Roman emperors, known for his debaucheries, political murders, and persecution of Christians.

Peter was writing to Christian citizens who were scattered throughout Asia minor (modern day Turkey), meaning Christians who are subjects of the Roman empire. Peter

was writing in interesting times, an extreme time, under an extremely pagan and godless ruler.

These are not cavalier words tossed out lightly, these are serious words for serious Christians in serious times, times like ours.

I Peter 2:11-12

At the beginning of our text Peter reminds his readers of their status. As the children of God, they are always sojourners and exiles on earth. We are only guests here, temporary residents. This world is not our home. Heaven is our native land. So, he says we ought to live here like that is true, having the character and nature and actions of a citizen of heaven, rather than the passions and bondages of one attached to earth.

Peter is reminding these Christians who they are and how they should live. Christians should hold loosely their lives here. Christians should live above the fray, above the chaos and the immorality.

We should not be the ones who are whining and complaining. We should not be the ones who are fearful and worried and anxious. We should not be the ones angry and disgruntled and frustrated and impatient. We worship the sovereign God who is completely in control. We are the ones who have the most hope.

We are the ones confident we have a better home and a better future.

We have the truth and because we have the truth we have hope and can offer hope. We are salt and light, we are beacons of truth, we have the words of life.

The best time to be a Christian is in hard times. That is when our witness and our example shines clearest and brightest. That's when people notice our Christ-like love, our Christ-like generosity, our Christ-like lack of fear.

This is our opportunity to bear witness to the sovereignty of God in the midst of this global upheaval, to share the secure hope He provides to all who turn to Jesus Christ in true faith. Christians should live exceptional lives in the midst of suffering because we follow a Savior who suffered and because suffering well brings glory to God.

We should be talking less about what we think about the stages of reopening and more about what God is doing, what God wants us to learn, and indeed, talking about what we have been learning and doing differently.

What difference has it made in our life now that we aren't caught up in sports or shopping and all the other distractions we were consumed by?

May we live and love in a way that the world sees the difference and comes to the conclusion, "They have been with Jesus."

I Peter 2:13-17

So now Peter says, since we are talking about how to live and love, and since we are being watched by a pagan world, let's talk about how we relate to those in authority over us. Let's tackle this in a series of questions.

Who are the authorities?

In Scripture we see God has ordained and appointed three spheres of sovereignty, three realms of authority. The family, the church and the state, and under the state there are many lesser authorities; business, work, schools, military.

Interestingly if you keep reading in I Peter, after he talks about the authority of the state, he moves on in chapter 3 to talk about authority in the home between husbands and wives, and then in chapter 5 to talk about authority in the church as exercised by elders and pastors.

This Scripture has application to all who are under any authority, to every area of our lives.

Why is there authority?

Romans 13:1 For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

There is authority because God ordained it. It is not by chance or just by vote, but by the providence of God. It is God who raises up and God who brings down, both leaders and nations as He pleases and for His good pleasure.

God is sovereign over all authority, over all leaders, kings, presidents, prime ministers, governors, health experts, all of them.

Authorities are not the source of their own authority; it originates from God. And one day they will answer to God for their use of the authority He gave them.

Guess what? They are all sinners, even the very best of them. God is sovereign over good leaders and bad leaders, even the most wicked leaders. None of them do anything apart from the will of God.

We must have a firm grasp of the sovereignty of God in these interesting times. God is not only behind the virus; He is behind every leaders' response to it at every level of government. That includes every decision made by every person in authority, whether their decision is good or bad, and has made the situation better or worse. This pandemic is going the way God wants it to go.

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Furthermore, there is authority because authority is a gift from God, a blessing from God for our benefit. This is especially evident when it is lacking. God has not left us to live like animals, He has not left us to live in chaos and confusion. Authority is for living a well-ordered life, not one in tyranny or anarchy. Authority and rule are a blessing.

Without authority and submission to authority our world would be misery and chaos. Just go to a country where traffic rules and lane markers and stop lights are a suggestion (Albania, India).

We wouldn't have a functioning government without submission to authority (Somalia). We wouldn't have jobs without submission to authority. Schools, military, businesses, churches would all be chaos. A car can't have two steering wheels.

God gives authority for the common good, to reward good and punish evil. This is another blessing of God when we live under authority where evil is generally not allowed and goodness is generally rewarded, or at least not hindered.

Why do we submit to authority?

Because all authority is from God, whether elected or not, they have a claim on our submission. We are called to submit to authority, even when that authority is unbelieving and pagan.

It is a general principle of Scripture and life that we should submit to all authorities. This is the principle behind the fifth commandment. The general result is it will go well with us.

We obey them because God tells us to (for the Lord's sake; for conscience sake), and not simply because we fear their punishments for wrongdoing. It is the will of God. The highest authority has told us to submit to all those in authority.

Did you notice that in this text about being subject and submitting Peter says live as people who are free? True submission is not being dominated or being a doormat, true submission is free.

We do this in *freedom*, as free people, this is our free response. Yet in this freedom we are servants of God. We submit what we want, to what He wants, our wills to His will.

Our freedom is to do what is right, to serve. We don't submit out of fear or because the government has power over us, we submit because our King has called us to submit to kings. Our consciences are free even as God commands us to be subject to human authorities.

Submitting humbles us and curbs our pride. We need some humility. Our national and state leaders are dealing with something unprecedented and unplanned for. We are ready for a military invasion but not this microscopic invasion.

They are making it up as they go and its easy for the rest of us to be armchair quarterbacks. Believe me the Packers would have won the Super Bowl this last year if they had just listened to me.

But it doesn't work that way, we are not in charge, we don't have all the information. We need to cut our leaders some slack and not assume the worst about them. Nobody knew three months ago what we know now, and three months from now will be completely different from now.

The smartest people have a limited knowledge of this virus, only God can predict with full accuracy the nature of the virus or the future consequences of present-day decisions about how to manage the virus. None of us would want to be in those seats of power and decision making.

Have a submissive spirit not a rebellious spirit.

The defining spirit in America today is not one of submission, but of rugged individualism and self-determination. No one tells us what to do. We believe in freedom and liberty, and anything that hinders that is bad. We say the only legitimate authority is the one we agree with or say is an authority.

We are chafing at all this lock-down stuff and how long these four stages are. We don't like what is going on, we see inequities in applying the orders to the whole state, we see things that don't make sense, certain entities open, others closed.

Submission doesn't imply agreement, in fact, it implies disagreement. If we agreed, then it would be agreement, not submission.

The greater danger than submitting to unjust or unfair governments and authorities, is setting ourselves up as their judge and resisting and bitterly hating and being rebellious. Being mistreated won't send you to hell but being rebellious without repentance will. Better to suffer than to be rebellious.

I Peter 2:18-20 Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. 19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 ... this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

Hebrews 10:32-36 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

Our basic demeanor, our default setting toward those in authority should be honor. Honor everyone and that means honor the emperor.

Daniel displayed this spirit when he asked permission not to eat the king's food, respectfully requesting to do otherwise. When told not to pray, he didn't argue, he simply carried on.

(David and Saul; Abigail and David; Jesus and authorities).

There are churches around the country that have disregarded governors' orders and have gathered. I assume their leadership prayerfully considered everything and acted according to conscience. My one issue with many of them that have been portrayed in the news is they are exhibiting a defiant, rebellious, dishonoring spirit. I might be wrong, but it looks like pride.

My point is if the time comes to disobey, it ought to be done humbly, like Daniel and the king's food, like Esther before King Ahasuerus, like Peter before the council.

We must consider our witness to Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel, that is more important. Are we showing a love for others or just a love for ourselves?

We will be greatly helped in having a humble, submissive spirit if we listened to the news less. It doesn't matter which side you favor, listening to the constant attack on the leaders on the other side does not help us honor and respect our leaders. Guard against bitterness and anger with less news and more Word and prayer.

When do we not submit?

Both Paul in Romans 13 and Peter in I Peter 2 don't give us any exceptions. But certainly, there must be some, after all both of them practiced civil disobedience at certain points in their lives and both of them died at the hands of the government.

Peter and Paul did not always submit, and there are times when God approved of His people not submitting. So, when is it right not to?

No human authority is absolute, only God's authority is absolute and unquestionable. Human authority is always finite, limited and under God's authority. Our submission is never a blind submission.

Civil disobedience is required when God's authority is usurped or cast aside. Whenever someone commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands, we must always be ready to say no.

In Acts civil disobedience is required when the Gospel is silenced, and worship is silenced. When there are laws or demands that are contrary to Scripture it was clear what must be done.

Want to know how to live in these interesting times with authorities we disagree with? Listen to a prayer prayed by Christians in interesting times, Christians who were being restricted.

Acts 4:27-29 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness

What characterizes us, boldness or bitterness?

Here is the bottom line. Praying for all who are in authority will help all of us honor them and submit to them. We are all dependent on God and should regularly and frequently show it by our intercession. Only by God's power and grace can we be governed wisely and well.

I Timothy 2:1-3 I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior.

May God gives us wisdom and grace and patience to live godly lives in these interesting times.

Prayer: Our Father in Heaven, thank you for the earthly example of your own Son who honored you with His perfect and complete and willing obedience. He showed reverence for you and you heard His prayers. He learned obedience through what He suffered on earth and for that reason is the fulfillment of this commandment and the one who gives us the power and grace to keep it as well. Holy Spirit do a new and transforming work in all our hearts, removing pride and rebellion and resistance and stubbornness and filling us anew with the grace of mutual submission, honoring others above ourselves, making allowances for others and overlooking offenses. Increase in this place greater love for you and for each other that we might prove to the on-looking world that we are your disciples.