

Sermon Brief

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April 3, 2022

Text: 1 Peter 2:13-17

Title: “Even Nero?”

Subject: The church is called to declare God’s goodness to the world.

Complement: Submission to authorities is a way to show God’s goodness.

Textual Idea: The Church is called to declare God’s goodness to the world which means submitting to governing authorities.

Sermon Idea: Ambassadors for Jesus represent Him in this chaotic world by submitting to governing authorities.

Interrogative: Am I honoring God in my response to authorities?

Key Points:

Ambassadors for Jesus represent Him in this chaotic world by:

1. Cooperating with government when possible.
2. Challenging government when necessary.
3. Praying for government always.

What do I want people to know? I want people to know that we are ambassadors of the kingdom of God called to make Christ known. To do that, we must maintain our personal integrity in the world by submitting joyfully to governing authorities...unless we’re asked to disobey God. Then we are to respectfully challenge them, while faithfully praying for them.

What do I want people to do? I want people to (1) obey governing authorities, (2) respectfully disobey if necessary, and (3) faithfully pray for them.

What need am I addressing? I am addressing the need to live lives that honor God in the midst of a pagan society.

“Even Nero?”

1 Peter 2:13-17

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Protests. They're everywhere! **(LCD) They're an American tradition** like no other! People protest all kinds of things from gun rights to racism to abortion and on and on. It's in our national blood from the very beginning when the guys dumped tea barrels in Boston Harbor. We're a protesting people. It's part of living in a democracy that we have the right to voice our displeasure. But should we as Christians? That's the million dollar question. Before we answer that too quickly, we need to think about our passage this morning...specifically, the political situation at the time.

You see, when Peter wrote this letter of 1 Peter, a guy named **(LCD) Nero** was in power. Ever heard of him? Maybe not as bad as Hitler but certainly worse than Putin! He was the fifth emperor of Rome, becoming so at age 17 with the help of his mother. His first five years were good as he had good influences, but then he became jealous of his mother and had her murdered. He had his two wives murdered too – lamenting both. He wasn't okay. Then in A.D. 64, a great fire burned a vast portion of Rome. Most think that Nero set it himself in order to clear room to build his palace.

Needing a scapegoat, he blamed the **(LCD) Christians** and famously would put them on top of wooden poles and set them on fire alive to light his parties. Eventually, he'd even put Peter himself to death. This state persecution of Christians would go on for 300 years. Yet Peter's message to the believers was “Submit to the governing authorities,” as you'll see. Which leaves us the simple question, “Even Nero?” Really? Chuck Swindoll adds this, **(LCD) “Remember, in Peter's day...a percentage of taxes Christians paid supported the construction of pagan temples and funded unjust wars. And don't forget – the insane dictator, Nero, was notoriously cruel toward Christians...Shouldn't they refuse to pay taxes that support such an oppressive regime? Or maybe take up arms and resist a government with such a leader? Peter said no. Nowhere in Scripture are revolt and anarchy promoted.”** Hmmm. We need to take seriously what God says about this matter of obeying our authorities. Are you ready? Even Nero? Yes, says Peter. Open up to 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 11.

We're in a sermon series on the book of 1 Peter which I've entitled, **(LCD) Alien Living in a Chaotic World**. The people Peter wrote to were struggling to live faithfully for Jesus in a pagan society. He spent two chapters reminding them that they are **(LCD) ambassadors of the kingdom of God clothed in His immense power!** Armed with that truth, he then shifted to how they are to live. Last week, we looked at the umbrella verses that set the context for his answer, 1 Peter 2:11-12, *“Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”* I summarized this by asking us if we were guilty of **(LCD) bumper sticker hypocrisy**. Saying one thing but living another. The two main points were that ambassadors for Jesus

represent Him in this chaotic world by **(LCD) living with integrity within ourselves and within the world**, thereby causing people to glorify God.

Peter then applies this to different social circles that believers in Peter's day struggled with and that we do too: **(LCD) submitting to governing authorities, working for mean masters, loving spouses in difficult marriages, and getting along with others.** We're looking at the first one today; let's see what Peter says, verse 13: "*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.*" (Pray)

The key word in this passage, and it will overshadow all four areas we'll look at, is **(LCD) submit. The Greek word, hupotasso, comes from Hupo – UNDER + Tasso – PLACE. To place under. "To arrange under, subordinate. In non-military use, it was "a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden."** It almost always speaks of hierarchy, which is not popular in our day either. It urges obedience to whoever one is subordinated to but notice that it is voluntary by nature. This isn't forced obedience, but a willing one. Also, it is "for the Lord's sake," a reminder that our ultimate allegiance is to the Lord Himself.

So we are to "*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority or institution.*" Notice too that it says, "every." Not only "the good ones" or "the just ones," but "every." Even Nero? The Apostle Paul seems to think so; Romans 13, **(LCD) "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."** Yup, even Nero. He was emperor when Paul wrote this too. Paul is recognizing that God is the ultimate ruler, and He is sovereign. We don't understand why He allows certain people to come to power, yet He does. His plan is bigger than what we can see, like the underside of a great tapestry. We see the knots while God sees the design. Rest assured that no matter who is in charge at any certain time, God is ultimately ruling as Daniel understood in his day with an unstable king, **(LCD) "Then Daniel praised the God of heaven and said: "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning."** God is in control – always. We can rest in that and submit knowing that our ultimate submission is to the Lord Himself.

Ideally, these rulers God sets up exist to, verse 14, punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right. Their job is to ensure order and uphold the good. This implies, as Paul says in Romans 13, that they carry out punishment. The word there means vengeance, justice, eye for an eye. It's not citizens who are to carry that out with vigilante justice, like Ahmaud Arbery's killers did, but the duly appointed government.

And many of them do so. We'll talk later about those who don't. But this is the clear, biblical role of human government of any kind: political, church, business...it's to ensure order and promote the common welfare. And when they do so, we are to submit to them from the highest one to the local ones. For Peter, it was from the Emperor to the local governors. For us, it's the president down to the mayor. We are to joyfully submit to their leadership as model citizens. Which is what we've been doing with the Covid town orders. It's not a sin to wear a mask so we joyfully submit out of reverence for Christ.

If we do so, Peter says, we'll not only be commended for doing right, but verse 15, we'll shut up those who slander Christians! Christians didn't have great reputations in the first century. They were stereotyped as traitors to Caesar, cannibals who "ate their Lord's body and blood," incestuous because they held "love feasts" with their brothers and sisters. Peter is encouraging them to change the narrative by living orderly, good lives in the pagan world. We've still got that PR problem in Christianity! We're stereotyped as haters, far-right activists, anti-science idiots. We can change that narrative too by getting involved in the world in a healthy, helpful way.

Commenting on that in his colonial days, Jonathan Edwards had a robust theology of public life for Christians. **(LCD) He said,**

- 1. Christians have a responsibility to society beyond the walls of the church.**
- 2. Christians should not hesitate to join forces with non-Christians in the public square toward common moral goals.**
- 3. Christians should support their governments but be ready to criticize them when necessary.**
- 4. Christians should remember that politics is comparatively unimportant in the long run.**
- 5. Christians should beware of national pride.**
- 6. Christians should care for the poor.**

We aren't meant to stay in our church waiting for Jesus to come rescue us from this dark world. We're called to be salt and light, make a positive impact for Christ, in our communities. And we can do that with all kinds of people of good will. Like The Underground and it's fight against human trafficking. We're partnered with the state, with towns, with universities, with other religious groups – anyone willing to fight against this great evil of modern human slavery. This, I believe, is what Peter has in mind. This shuts up ignorant talk that Christians are only concerned with heaven.

This is how we use our freedom which is what Peter says next, verse 16, "*Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.*" Surely some had asked, "We're not pagans anymore, why should we submit to pagan authorities? Didn't the gospel set us free?" Yes, it did. However, remember what Paul said about our freedom in Christ, **(LCD) "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."** Freedom is not a release from slavery to autonomy, but from slavery to sin to slavery to Christ. We are not our own. We are here to do His will. And verse 15 makes clear that His will is for us to do good. As Martin Luther famously said,

(LCD) “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all.”

That’s what Peter says next in verse 17, “*Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.*” Yup, even Nero. We’re to honor, respect everyone because they are made in the image of God. Period. Listen. EVERY human being is worthy of God-fearing respect – doesn’t matter who they are. This is why there is no room for ethnic jokes, gay jokes, derogatory statements of any kind. Don’t participate in anything that degrades a human being made in the image of God. You can disagree with people’s choices, beliefs, lifestyles, but Christians should be models of respect for the intrinsic value of every human being. Period...out of fear of God who made them all. That was the main problem with **(LCD) Will Smith’s smacking of Chris Rock** at the Oscar’s. Yes, Rock was out-of-line, but Smith returned insult with insult. Nope. I like what one commentator said, **(LCD) “No matter what the provocation, they (believers) must not lose respect for their fellow citizens or forget the common humanity they all share.”** May we set the pace for human dignity.

And to those who we are bonded in Christ with – we are to love them, an even higher duty than honoring. How much our reputation in the world would increase if we believers in Christ would stop separating over every different opinion and judging each other. Jesus said that the world would know Him through our love for one another. Remember, this is Peter’s highest concern, being good bumper stickers, advertisements for Christ in the world. It starts with loving our own family and then honoring all humans...even Nero!

But what about the Nero’s, the Putin’s, the Hitler’s of the world? What does it mean to submit to them? Is it okay to protest our leaders? First of all, we need to remember that there are all kinds of biblical examples of what’s called ‘civil disobedience. Here are just a few: **(LCD)**

- **Hebrew Midwives and Moses’ Parents (Exodus 1) – Pharaoh said kill all the Hebrew babies and the Hebrew midwives and Moses’ parents disobeyed him.**
- **Rahab (Joshua 2) – the king of Jericho said report spies and she hid them.**
- **Esther (Esther 4) – it was against the law to come into the king’s presence, but Esther did anyways to protest the treatment of her people.**
- **Daniel and His Friends (Daniel 3,6) – Daniel and his three friends all refused to bow down and worship a false god.**
- **Peter and John (Acts 5) – though not technically ‘civil,’ Peter and John disobeyed religious authorities by continuing to preach the gospel.**

So clearly there are times when we can and even should protest against unjust and ungodly rulings of authorities. In a recent sermon on Acts 5, Pastor Paul Carter noted **(LCD) five principles for disobeying an authority:**

1. You need to have a clear command of God. He goes on to add, “*Therefore, you can’t disobey because you think a law is stupid or unlikely to work or probably unnecessary. The law of the land needs to forbid something God commands or command something God forbids in order to qualify.*”

2. Address civil authorities with respect.

3. Do not resist arrest. Again, he adds, *“The disciples went with the guards when summoned. They did not break out of jail – they were released by an angel. Violence against police or prison officials is never permitted.”*

4. Punishments must be accepted.

5. The forbidden action should not cease after initial censure and punishment.

Peter and John do all of these before the religious authorities. They were told to stop preaching in Jesus’ name which was not an option for them since Jesus had commanded them to do just that. When there is a direct contradiction of God’s law and human law, one must obey God first...and accept the consequences. Rev. Martin Luther King understood that when he stood up against the Jim Crow laws. He said, **(LCD) “An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law”** Amen to that. He protested non-violently, respectfully, never resisted arrest, accepted punishment, and continued fighting for justice when he was released. Just like Peter and John. In doing so, he and they were honoring the law of both God and man.

Now with all that said, it’s hard to lay down any hard and fast guidelines. Fully devoted disciples of Jesus can land in very different places. When it came to the Nazi atrocities of WWII, **(LCD) Corrie Ten Boom and her family** were led to never lie to the Nazis: yet at the same time. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was led to participate in the plot to assassinate Hitler. He agonized over that decision and only arrived at it after years and years of prayer and a willingness to accept responsibility for his action. Who was right? We’ll leave that to God...the bottomline is that no one should participate in civil disobedience lightly. God’s command is clear, “Honor the king.” Even Nero. If you’re led otherwise, you better be VERY sure.

In summary, I like how Pastor Bryan Wilkerson summarized a Christian’s biblical duties to civil authorities, **(LCD) “Christians are to cooperate with their government whenever possible, challenge their government whenever necessary, and pray for their government at all times.”** I like that. It’s succinct and I believe accurate. Let me share some practical ways we can do this even right now at Wintonbury. **(LCD) As far as cooperation** goes, Connecticut is going to be receiving Ukrainian refugees soon. Someone in the congregation has proposed that we take initiative and offer our services to the town government. He even suggested we purchase a small house where we could house several families. Anyone resonate with that? Talk to us.

As for challenge, several of you were involved in the **(LCD) March for Life** protest last week at the state capital. Over 3000 people came out in support of the unborn. Unfortunately, the House voted a few days later to amend our state constitution to include the ‘right’ to abortion up until the moment of birth. But there’s still time to write your senators. – we’ll have information on how to do so in next Friday’s Wintonbury Weekend.

Finally, **(LCD) prayer**. Consider joining us to pray for our leaders on the National Day of Prayer, May 5th here at church. As Paul commanded, **(LCD) “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”** Do you see the tie between how we treat our authorities and the preaching of the gospel? When we are model citizens, joyfully submitting to our authorities, it sets the stage to talk about our Lord Jesus. Before we pray, let me share one last quote that I think really sums all this up, again from Bryan Wilkerson, **(LCD) “I think it's fair to ask...Are the political attitudes of Christians toward government so positive and respectful that other people admire us for it? I'm afraid that's not always the case...Wouldn't it be great for Christians to lead the way in cleaning up the toxic political atmosphere in our culture!”** Amen to that. Let's pray.