

## ***Responsibilities More Than Rights • 1 Peter 2:13-25***

I drove the car into the Hertz lot at Los Angeles International Airport. I was first in line to return the car but no one was doing the checking-in. I think employees were changing shifts. By the time the check-in man came with his machine there was a long line of cars. He came to me first and when he finished he turned to two waiting male travelers and asked, "Who's next?" They both said, "I am." That began a heated argument with words of exaggerated mock courtesy like, "Let me tell you, sir, that you are wrong. I was ahead of you." I left to board the shuttle to the terminal. They both missed the bus as they argued who had the right to go first.

There is a natural tendency to insist upon our rights. It is a combination of human pride, personal dignity and maybe even legal privilege. One of the foundation stones of our American government is the Bill of Rights. They were the earliest amendments to the United States Constitution: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom against self-incrimination and others. We almost take for granted our rights to a speedy trial and to be presumed innocent until proven guilty. These are wonderful rights, indeed.

But we also have responsibilities. We are responsible to pay taxes, to serve on juries, to recognize the jurisdiction of courts and to vote.

The New Testament teaches Christians how to live in a world with rights and responsibilities. It explains that Christians have rights not available to anyone else. Jesus said in John 1:12, "*To all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*" Imagine that! As Christians we have the right to belong to God's family, to confess our sins and receive forgiveness, to pray directly to God, to get divine answers to our prayers and to have the guarantee

***As Christians we have the right to belong to God's family, to confess our sins and receive forgiveness, to pray directly to God, to get divine answers to our prayers and to have the guarantee of eternal life in heaven.***

of eternal life in heaven. We have lots of amazing Christian rights. But, when teaching Christians how to live in difficult times St. Peter emphasized the responsibilities more than the rights. He said in 1 Peter 2:13-17:

*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.*

This takes some modernization to apply to 21<sup>st</sup> century America. We haven't had a king here since 1776. For us the words might go something like this: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to President George W. Bush, the Supreme Court, the Congress, Governor Tim Pawlenty or the Minnesota Legislature."

As Americans we don't like submitting to anyone. Americans have polarized political opinions and often feel no inclination to respect political leaders we don't like. The Bible seems out of date. There are laws we don't agree with, taxes we don't want to pay and policies and

behaviors we may even abhor.

Let's remember that when Peter wrote these words it was A.D. 67. The king was Nero. He was an evil dictator who blamed his own arson on the Christians saying that followers of Jesus had burned Rome when Nero had done it himself. What Christian in his right mind would ever submit to Nero? And, it was a governor named Pontius Pilate

who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus. That Christians were expected to submit to and respect Roman political authority was either ridiculous or revolutionary. It was revolutionary!

Neither they nor we are called upon to agree with the government or to say that the politicians are right. This is a behavior standard not a belief standard. But that throws up at least two huge questions: Why? and How?

Why would we do that? The first answer is: For the Lord's sake. Submit to government because God wants you to. To a fully committed follower of Jesus Christ that is the only answer that is really needed. If we really love God and really desire to live for God we will do whatever he wants. If he wants us to believe we will believe. If he wants us to be baptized we will be baptized. If he wants us to forgive we will forgive. If he wants us to be generous we will be generous. For Christians there is no better reason to do anything than "for the Lord's sake."

He also gives a second answer to the "why" question when he says that *"it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men."* So, Christians should submit to government because God wants to shut-up those who criticize Christians.

In the first century many said that Christians were disloyal, that Christians were traitors, that Christians were primarily political rather than spiritual. God wanted the critics silenced so that the message of God would not be obscured with political disloyalty.

There is a similar issue in every generation because there are politics in every generation. Unfortunately politics and Christianity have sometimes been confused. Political activism can still obscure the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. So God tells us:

*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.*

How are we supposed to submit to government authorities? In verse 16 he says:

*Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.*

Christians are to under-emphasize rights and over-emphasize responsibilities. We have total freedom in Jesus Christ but we are not to use our freedom to cover-up our anger, hostility, selfish ambition or our desire to have our own way. Christians are to show respect for everyone. But what if presidents, kings, dictators, emperors, legislators, police and judges don't deserve respect? What if they have been assigned to punish wrong and commend good but they do the opposite (they punish good and commend evil)? We are to still show respect!

*"Live as servants of God."* Suppose you work for a good company and have a boss you love. Your loyalty is intense. One day the boss calls you into the office and says you are being assigned to a special project in another company and another town. You will work for the next year for one of you boss's customers. When you get there you discover that the managers are incompetent. What do you do? You do your best. You show respect, fulfill your assignments and seek to be the best worker in the office . . . not because of the president and company at the temporary assignment but because of the real boss back home whom you love and respect.

As Christians we love and respect God. God has given us a temporary duty assignment on earth (in America) and he has told us to submit, respect and do a good job for his sake.

There is a summary here of what to do every day: *"Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."*

What if we're asked to do something immoral? What if the king or president or governor asks us to murder, lie or steal? The answer: Don't do it. God asks us to do everything we possibly can to be good citizens but he never asks us to do something sinful. If submission to political leaders

means sinning against God, just don't do it. But, go as far as you can. Obey everything possible. Show respect.

Simply stated: Be a really good Christian citizen. If you're a student, obey the principal. If you're a defendant, obey the judge. If you're a soldier, obey the commanding officer. If you're a citizen, obey the laws and leaders of the land. Emphasize responsibilities over rights.

What Peter writes next may seem totally irrelevant to us but was of huge interest to first century readers. It is written to slaves—and the majority of people in the Roman Empire were slaves. They numbered as many as 60 million.

Slaves had no rights. They had the same legal standing as property. Slaves could not marry but they were forced to live together and have children. The children were not their own; they belonged to the slave owner. The master could beat, rape, sell or kill a slave and there was nothing the slave could do about it.

Slaves came from all walks of life. Many were captured by Roman armies and were relocated elsewhere in the empire. Many were born into slavery as children and grandchildren of slaves. They were physicians, accountants, philosophers, teachers, managers, artists, nurses and just about every profession. The logic of the Romans was that they were conquerors and conquerors shouldn't have to work. Everybody else should do their work for them.

Some Romans were vicious to their slaves, but many were kind and generous. Slaves were part of the family. Slaves were sometimes respected and loved. But they were still slaves.

Most people were slaves. Therefore most Christians were slaves. Imagine yourself there then. You would probably not be free. You would be a slave. So, listen to I Peter 2:18-20 from your perspective as a slave owned by someone else:

*Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those*

*who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.*

Try hearing this from the first century rather than the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It speaks to reality, not idealism. Ideally, slavery should have been abolished. A few thousand Christian slaves weren't able to do that. If they tried they would have been killed and Christians would have been snuffed out. The Bible recognizes reality and teaches how to deal with it. It tells us what to do. As a Christian, be the best slave you can be. Do your job well. Don't complain even if you are treated unfairly and harshly.

Are Christians here being told to passively take abuse? Is the Bible condoning human rights violations? Is this a license for slavery, abortion, racism, poverty, sexual abuse and more? Absolutely not! To the contrary, the Bible conveys deep confidence that the transforming power of Jesus Christ will so change individuals that they will change the world. The question is whether we will place our confidence in human initiative or divine intervention.

***...the Bible conveys deep confidence that the transforming power of Jesus Christ will so change individuals that they will change the world.***

What happened in the first century demonstrates how God works. Slaves and masters turned to Christ. The New Testament book of Philemon is a specific

case study. Masters joined churches where slaves were leaders. Christianity altered master-slave relationships. The number of Christians grew and grew until Christianity, not slavery, dominated the Roman Empire.

But, in the meantime, what about the slave who was beaten and wounded by an ungodly master? What is this slave supposed to do when it's going to take another generation before Christianity brings justice? The answer is not an easy one, but it is a quintessentially Christian answer. The an-

swer is to suffer like Jesus. I Peter 2:21-25 tells us:

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

The greatest honor for any Christian is to be like Jesus. When we suffer unjustly we are experiencing a bit of what Jesus experienced. He never did anything wrong. He was kind and loving and self-giving. And look at what he got for doing what was right. He was beaten, spit on, mocked, crucified and stabbed. Jesus took all that for Christians—for us. When we suffer unjustly, we are to think of doing this for him. We show others how Christians behave in the worst of times in order to make Jesus look good.

We read stories of American prisoners of war who have suffered atrocities too awful to describe. Yet, so many of them kept their dignity and represented America well in the face of horror. It makes us proud to be Americans. If POWs can do that for their country, Christians can do that for Jesus. That’s what first century Christian slaves thought and how they behaved.

We are not close to being slaves. Our worst problems are nothing compared to those of first century Christian slaves. But if we take seriously what the Bible calls us to do we will go to work every day focused on making Jesus look good. We will do the best job we possibly can. If we are not treated fairly, if we are not paid well, we will still do our best for Jesus’ sake. It’s not that we can’t exercise our rights. It’s not that we shouldn’t seek justice. It’s just that we will put responsibility first. We will do everything for Jesus’ sake, not for ourselves. In Colossians 3:17 we learn, “*Whatever*

*you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

During a visit to West Africa the daughter of missionaries told me a memorable story. When she was a little girl in the old Belgian Congo her parents took her to a large celebration marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coming of Christians to that part of the Congo. There were daylong festivities with singing and eating and speeches. Near sunset a very old man asked if he could address the people. He said that he would soon die and that he knew some things no one else knew. If he died without telling his story it would be buried with him.

He said that when the missionaries first came to that part of Africa, his people didn’t know whether or not to believe them. The tribal leaders conspired together to slowly poison the missionaries to death, one at a time, as a test. First a baby, then a father, then an older child, next a mother. Over months and eventually over years these missionaries died and those that survived buried them—until eventually they all died. Then the tribal leaders said, “If that’s what Christians are like, we want to be Christians, too.” The old man continued, “There are thousands of Christians here today because of the way the missionaries lived and died a century ago.”

Those missionaries had every right to quit. But they emphasized responsibility over rights. They counted it an honor to live for Jesus. They made Jesus look very good!

You and I will have a thousand opportunities to choose between putting first our rights or our responsibilities. Be the kind of citizen—be the kind of worker—who causes others to want to follow Jesus!

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.faithmatters.fm](http://www.faithmatters.fm)  
©Leith Anderson