

ELECT EXILES

Part 4: "How to Engage Politics"

1 Peter 2:11-25

Sunday, May 24, 2020

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"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Peter 2:11–25, ESV).

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of your word. May your Spirit form us and shape us to be a people that reflect you to the world around us. In Jesus's name, I pray. Amen.

Introduction – Election Season & The Question of Political Engagement

I once thought nothing in America is more divisive than an election year. But I was wrong. I now think that there is nothing in America more divisive than an election year during a global pandemic.

The political system for the United States was designed (in the words of our Constitution) *"in order to form a more perfect union."* But more and more in the last few decades, the political process has strayed away from a vision for national union into a viciously polarized battle between "us" and "them." We are increasingly the Divided States of America.

It seems we've lost the ability to do politics well. We've lost the ability as a society to have truly civil discourse. We've lost the ability to distinguish disagreement from hatred. Instead of honest, meaningful debate, our political leaders tend to dehumanize and demonize their opponents. Instead of seeking to be well informed on political issues, many in our nation tend to select news sources that simply confirm what we already want to believe.

So, as we enter into this election season that I think it is really wise to ask the questions: *What is the distinctively Christian response to this environment? How should Christians engage politics?*

On the one hand, Christians must not put too much stock into politics, in such a way that politics drive our imaginations and passions more than anything else. After all, we are a people who serve a God whose kingdom is "not of this world" (Jn 18:36).¹ God is ultimate. Politics are not. Politics can be good and helpful, but a politician or a political party will never save your soul.²

On the other hand, Christians must not grow cynical about politics either. I have to tell you this temptation has been my personal struggle. But cynicism is always the easy way out. Whenever difficult problems arise, it is much easier to sit on the sidelines and cleverly mock and critique our leaders and institutions instead of trying to engage the mess and create solutions.

Thus, I believe American Christians must seek to be engaged, responsible citizens who work to build a better nation, but that also do so without their ultimate hope being set on a system of government.

So how do we do this? Here I think the Apostle Peter has a lot to teach us.

Exposition – 3 Principles that Govern Christian Political Engagement

This passage is written to a group of Christians in a political and cultural climate that is admittedly very different than our own. Nevertheless, I believe this passage in 1 Peter could be seen as a type of road map for political engagement in modern-day America with three governing principles. For Christians to faithfully engage today's political environment we must do so with **1.) A Radically Counter-cultural View of Morality, 2.) A Radically Counter-cultural View of Authority, and 3.) A Radically Counter-cultural View of Freedom.**

1.) A Radically Counter-cultural View of Morality.

Let's reread verses 11 and 12: *"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Pt 2:11-12).*

This is a two-fold command. Peter tells us to (1) abstain (or withhold ourselves from) from fleshly desires and (2) keep our conduct honorable so that the watching world might glorify God through our deeds.

Now, this ethical outlook is, by its very nature, a counter-cultural challenge much of our culture's morality. Instead of believing in a Sovereign God, our culture tends to believe in a Sovereign Self. It's a worldview that has been termed "Expressive Individualism." Many of the movies that we watch and the songs that we sing all suggest that we will find meaning only when we express our deepest desires – no matter how those desires might affect the world around us. Our cultural logic is that if you want

¹ It is very interesting to note that Christians have been able to disagree on politics from the very beginning. In fact, Jesus' twelve disciples included Simon the Zealot (who wanted to overthrow the Roman Empire) and Matthew the tax collector (who supported the Roman Empire). Christians are united not by a political ideology, but by a theology.

² Douthat, Ross. *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. (New York: Free Press, 2012), 268. "...the two heresies of nationalism have taken turns in the driver's seat of both political coalitions, giving us messianism from the party in power and apocalypticism from the party out of power, regardless of which party is which."

to find your purpose, you just got to *let it go* [Show image of Elsa from Disney's *Frozen* (2013)]. *Let it go. Don't hold it back any more.*

But the Bible acknowledges that while God created us as "desiring creatures,"³ sin has tainted us to oftentimes desire things that will hurt us. Not every desire we have is healthy. Not every desire, if followed, will lead us to a good place.

Proverbs 14:12 tells, "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death*" (Pr 14:12). In fact, oftentimes, if we feed our desires, our desires will dehumanize us and even destroy us. This why Peter says to fight fleshly desires, "*which wage war against your soul.*"

And as we have seen elsewhere in this letter, Peter reminds us how our identity in God empowers this task.⁴ Christians are to display this counter-cultural morality as "*sojourners and exiles*" (1 Pt. 2:11) who are "*among the Gentiles*" (1 Pt 2:12). The irony here is Peter is talking to a bunch of people who are by ethnicity Gentiles, meaning that they are not Jewish by their race. But now, because of their faith in Jesus, they are a part of the kingdom of God. Their new citizenship is to be the most core element of their identity, and as such, it should transform the way that they live. We are elect exiles. Sin is no longer our cultural way of life. Our lives instead are to be visible signs of the kingdom of God.

This means that Christians should be a people who are deeply concerned with morality. But rather than being a people who simply talk about morality, we should first seek to be a people who visibly display the Lordship of God within our lives. In fact, the phrase for "*good deeds*" (καλῶν ἔργων) in this text can mean "beautiful" or "attractive" deeds.⁵ Our lives should actively attract people to the kingdom of God.

Christians must be different from society but engaged in society at the same time. As Dr. Russell Moore writes, "*The church is not to be walled up from the broader culture but to speak to it, but that can only happen if, as sojourners and exiles, we have something distinctive to say.*"⁶

But notice that Peter is also very realistic. He knows that even the sincerest Christians will be spoken against as "*evildoers*" (1 Pt 2:12). In the ancient Roman Empire, people often thought that Christians were assumed to be guilty of practicing cannibalism and incest.⁷ Now, why on earth would people think that you might ask? Well, when Ancient Christians often partook of a meal together called Holy Communion, they talked as if they were receiving the body and the blood of a Person. They also had the habit of calling each other "brother" and "sister," even when they were married. You can see how easily these Christians could be misunderstood.

But Peter is saying to Christians, even though you will be irrationally hated, even though you will be misunderstood, be committed to doing of public good. For through those good deeds, the Spirit of God will provoke frustration and curiosity among the very people who oppose you.

I have a friend that I love very much, who is not a Christian and he is not afraid to express his disdain for Christians. But to my surprise, the current pandemic has allowed him to follow some of the things

³ Smith, James K.A. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 51.

⁴ Helm, David. *1 & 2 Peter and Jude: Sharing Christ's Sufferings. Preaching the Word series*. Ed. R. Kent Hughes. (Wheaton: Crossway), 83.

⁵ Clowney, Edmund. *The Message of 1 Peter: The Way of the Cross. The Bible Speaks Today series*. New Testament Ed. John R.W. Stott. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 103

⁶ Moore, Russell D. *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel*. (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 78.

⁷ Clowney, 110.


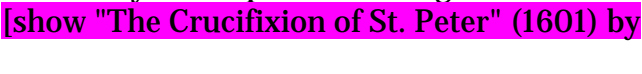
we have done as a church online. And he told me recently, "I am no fan of religion. But what you guys are doing is the real deal. You love people. You love your city. And you seem to try to live out what Christ taught. I respect that."

We cannot control what people think of us. But we can either play into the hateful caricatures that the world wants to believe about us, or we can disrupt people's preconceived notions by displaying Christ.

2.) A Radically Counter-cultural View of Authority.

Let's take a look at the next few verses, "*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people*" (1 Pt. 2:13-15).

Now, I have to be honest with you. When I read these verses, the first thing I wanted to do was immediately talk about exceptions to this command. I wanted to talk about when it is okay to disobey governmental authority. But if I am honest to this text, this set of verses is not about civil disobedience, but rather civil obedience.⁸

Peter actually commands Christians to be subject to the government. Now, you may be thinking: "*Well, Peter didn't live under our government.*" And you're right. He lived under a government that was *way* worse. As crazy as it is, Peter even specifically talks about submission to the Roman Emperor . Now, at the time this letter was written, the Roman Emperor is a man named Nero. This is the same Nero who will eventually lead a persecution against Christians during which Peter himself will die by crucifixion .

But nevertheless, this submission is "*for the Lord's sake*" (1 Pt. 2:13), and through this submission to authority, Christians are able to put to silence "*the ignorance of foolish people*" (1 Pt. 2:15).

Now, why should Christians be able to do this? I would suggest two reasons.

Firstly, Christians should recognize that even the *best* political government is a necessary but flawed coping mechanism for a fallen world. Secondly, Christians should realize that even the *worst* political system cannot thwart God's plan of redemption.

By embracing these two truths, Christians can submit to governing institutions in light of the eternal vindication that comes from an eternal kingdom. Our hope is not in the republican or democratic party. Rather our hope is in an eternal monarchy that will know no end.

So, what does Godly submission to authority practically look like in a democratic society in which citizens play a role in the political process? Here is a shortlist of recommendations.

- a) **Christians should seek to be law-abiding citizens.** This means we should obey traffic laws, serve on jury duty, and honestly pay our taxes to the glory of God.
- b) **Christians should vote for virtuous policies, laws, and leaders.** And when we vote, we should vote with values shaped by the word of God, instead of self-interest or cultural trends.

⁸ Helm, 90.

- c) Christians should be engaged in politics at a local level, not just a national level. This means that we should be asking how we could help make our city a city where justice and flourishing take place.
- d) Christians should pray for our leaders like Mayor Nelson, Governor Abbott, and President Trump. We should pray that God would grant our leaders minds of wisdom, hearts of justice, and integrity of character.
- e) If called by God, Christians should actively participate in the political process, by participating in campaigning, committees, or even running for office.
- f) When Christians speak about our political views, we should do so in a distinctly Christian way that reflects the kindness of Christ and our ability to see the image of God within those we disagree with.
- g) Christians must be more loyal to the kingdom of God than the kingdom of man, or any political party of man. For this reason, there will be times when it is good and godly to practice a form of civil disobedience. However, this should *only* happen when Christians are commanded to actively sin against God. In such cases, like Peter said elsewhere in Scripture, we must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29).

Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that in relation to government, the emphasis of Scripture is on submission.

Likewise, Peter follows this passage up with another command: "*Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust*" (1 Pt 2:18).

Paul teaches something similar in his letter to the Ephesians in an even more extended way, "*Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ*" (Eph 6:5).

First things first, you need to know that these verses are some of the most controversial and misunderstood verses in the Bible. There have been atheist groups that will put verses like this on billboards and advertise that the Bible is an outdated book because it condones and supports slavery [Show Image of "Slaves" Billboard].

The question arises; does the Bible condone slavery, as in the chattel slavery that took place in America prior to the Civil War? The answer is emphatically, "*no!*"

In fact, if you study history, it was Christians like William Wilberforce (1759-1833) [show image of William Wilberforce] who led the charge in bringing down the institution of chattel slavery in the western world. We cannot impose the category of American chattel slavery in the 1800s onto a letter that the Apostle Peter is writing in the first century A.D.

In Roman society, to be "servant" or "bondservant" was to be someone who had some type of debt and then contracted his or her services to a "master" or "boss" to pay off that debt.

By the time of Peter's life and ministry, most people who had a vocation in Roman society were working off some type of debt as bondservants. You had high-class bondservants and low-class bondservants. So, you had bondservants who were maids and custodians. But you also had bondservants who were doctors and lawyers and teachers.⁹ Most bondservants had their own homes or apartments, and more than half of all slaves of the Roman Empire had paid their debts and

⁹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 207.

purchased their own freedom by the age of thirty.¹⁰

So, what does this all mean for us, you might ask? It means when New Testament authors use the term "servant" or "bondservant," they are talking to anyone working under the authority of another so that they can pay off debt and have the means that they need order to live life.

For today, that means if you are paying back a loan with dollars you earn from your work, or if you have any type of oversight or boss, the biblical passages on servanthood can still apply to you and help form a gospel-centered vision for work.

Simply said, when we take the New Testament's teaching on Christian work ethic all together, the word of God calls Christians to work in a way that reflects diligence, respect, wisdom, humility, servant-heartedness, and integrity of character.

Especially, in our passage today, Peter is telling Christians that the way they work for and honor their pagan bosses can give glory to God. Even when we suffer in the workplace, we can suffer for the sake of the gospel.

3.) A Radically Counter-cultural View of Freedom.

Today there is a lot of talk about freedom. You could easily make the argument that freedom is the most important – and sacred – virtue in secular American society.¹¹ But when Americans talk about freedom, it usually is the freedom to do whatever we as individuals want. But, from a biblical worldview, sometimes what we want enslaves us.

Peter argues that Christians already have the most ultimate form of freedom Look again at verse 16, **"Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God" (1 Pt 2:16).**

This Christian freedom is not a freedom *to* sin; rather, it is a freedom *from* sin. It is a Spirit-filled freedom unto righteousness that empowers grace-motivated obedience to God. In other words, Christian freedom is not the freedom to do whatever *we* want; it is the freedom to do whatever *Christ* wants.

But in the specific context of 1 Peter, I think this freedom refers to a freedom from a fear of man, freedom from a need to prove ourselves, a freedom from a need to protect ourselves, and a freedom to truly love our enemies.¹²

This freedom actually creates the ability for Christians to honor and serve those who disagree with us and even hate us. As verse 17 summarizes, **"Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Pt 2:17).**

¹⁰ "A slave could be a custodian, a salesman, or a CEO. Many slaves lived separately from their owners. Finally, selling oneself into slavery was commonly used as a means of obtaining Roman citizenship and gaining an entrance into society. Roman slavery in the first century was far more humane and civilized than the American/African slavery practiced in this country much later. This is a sobering and humbling fact!" R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 206.

¹¹ Keller, 140.

¹² Clowney, 104. "Because we are God's own possession, beloved of the Lord, we need not cherish our own dignity."¹²

Can we honestly say we are a people who are so free that we honor everyone – even people we disagree with, even political leaders we are opposed to, even those who dishonor us? Can we honestly say we love our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? Can we honestly say all our thoughts, words, and actions reflect a genuine fear of the Lord? How can the commands of verse seventeen not spark some level of self-reflection or conviction, in our age of outrage and opinions?

Christians are to have a love for fellow Christians and awestruck worship for God that is covered in honor towards society and the state. Because our kingdom is not of this world, we do not have to participate in the culture of outrage. We don't have to demonize people who have different views than us. We don't have to fight people "red tooth and claw" for our liberty because you know what? Our truest liberty was won on Calvary before we were even born! We are now free to honor all people as made in the image and likeness of God.

Society cannot and will not be willing to do something this radical. This can only come from a radically counter-cultural view of freedom – a freedom to serve Christ as our ascended King.

Conclusion – Christ's Example

But yet again, Peter is not exactly inventing a brand-new outlook on political engagement. Rather, he is simply asking Christians to model what Jesus Christ displayed in life.

Jesus came not only to talk about the righteousness of God – he embodied the radical morality of the kingdom. Our passage talks about submission to "*governors*" sent by the emperor (1 Pt 2:14). But Jesus himself submitted to one such governor named Pontius Pilate. The book of Philippians tells us that he even became like a "servant" even to the point of death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8). In fact, we serve a Savior who did not claim his rights and freedom as the King of Heaven, but rather gave up his rights and freedom to redeem his enemies.

Peter reminds us that, in his suffering, Christ did not sin, and he did not speak deceitful words (1 Pt 2:22). He did not threaten his enemies or revile those who abused him (1 Pt 2:23). He entrusted himself to the perfect justice of God.

Jesus is both the victim of true injustice as well as the Judge who will one day bring about perfect justice. He is the one by whose wounds we are healed! He is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. But he is also the Sovereign King who will one day return and heal all that is broken in our world.

I think a lot of our angst in today's culture derives from the fact that we know we live in a world that is deeply broken. We live in a world of injustice. We live in a world where nations, states, political leaders, and the wealthy often abuse power, with seemingly no recourse.

And we rightly cry out against the abuse of power. But rather than succumbing to the desire of the flesh or getting caught up in the culture of outrage and hate and venom, in Christ, we can choose a different way.

For those who are in Christ, we have been absolved of the unendurable and impossible task of creating our own justice. We are liberated to trust in the hope of one who is just and powerful enough to right all that is wrong.

This is why we can turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and joyously suffer injustice (Mt 5:38-42). For our once-crucified, now-resurrected King is coming – and his righteous reign will have no end.

But as we wait for this kingdom, we must know that the justice that we long for will not be the temporary justice brought about by the power of human swords and human politics. Rather we rest in the hope of the absolute and eternal justice of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ.¹³

This is how Christians engage politics.

AMEN.

Prayer

Almighty and Everlasting God, in a culture so full of fear and anger, help us to be a people that display the righteousness, peace, and joy of your kingdom.

May your Spirit empower us to abstain from the desires of our flesh, and to submit to the leading of your Holy Spirit.

Lord, in light of your Scripture today, I want to pray for our mayor, our governor, our president, and all of our leaders. We pray that you would grant them minds of wisdom, justice, and compassion. We pray that you will empower our leaders to be men and women of character. And we pray that the way we treat and speak of our leaders would be distinctively Christ-like, in a culture filled with hatred.

Help us to embrace the true and better freedom of the gospel – not to live as we desire, but as you desire us to live. May your Spirit empower us to display the way of Christ to a watching world.

In Jesus's name, I pray. AMEN.

¹³ Clowney, 108.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities:

- 1.) *Read 1 Peter 2:11-25. Put some of the big ideas of this passage into your own words.*
- 2.) *As we seek to engage society effectively, why is it so important for Christians "to abstain from the passions of the flesh" and conduct ourselves with honor (1 Pt. 2:11-12)? How should the Christian identity of "sojourner" and "exile" empower this task?*
- 3.) *Soon to be executed by the Roman Emperor Nero, Peter nevertheless commands Christians to be subject to the human institutions of government (1 Pt. 2:13). Why is this command so important for Christian witness? How should Christians seek to obey this command in today's society?*
- 4.) *In a society that is often obsessed with individual liberties and rights, how should Christians project a counter-cultural view of freedom (1 Pt. 2:16)?*

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