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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“SUBVERSIVE SUBMISSION”**

**First Peter 2:13-17**

{Lk 20:21; Mt 22:17b} **“Teacher... you speak and teach what is right, and... you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.” “Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”**

On one level this is about money: should God’s people pay taxes, including the imperial tax which Caesar wrings out of conquered peoples but not Roman citizens?

On another level it is about overall compliance: should we submit to the government even when our rulers practice (and promote) immorality, injustice, and idolatry?

{Mt 22:21b} The Messiah answers, **“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”**

It sounds neat and simple – but it isn’t.

? *What properly belongs to the government and what belongs to the LORD God?*

? {1 P 1:9} *As God’s “chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation” and “special possession” what is our obligation to worldly authorities?*

? *What if our leaders’ behavior is offensive and their policies are wrong?*

? *What if the problems aren’t limited to an official or political party? What if the whole system is dysfunctional or rotten or oppressive?*

Please turn with me to First Peter 2:13-14: **“Submit yourselves...to every human authority: whether to the**

**emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him...”**

📖 **“Submit yourselves.”** Ὑποτασσῶ [hypotassō] is compounded of ὑπο [hypo] (that is, “under”) and τασσῶ [tassō] (“to [put in] order, to arrange”), so it literally means **“put yourselves in order under.”** In effect: {NRSV} **“accept the authority of,”** {CEV} **“obey.”**

**“Submit... to every human authority... the emperor, as the supreme authority... governors, who are sent by him,”** and by extension other leaders in positions of inherited, appointed, or elected power.

Keep in mind that Peter is writing during the reign of Nero. This emperor is almost as bad as his public image, and that is saying a great deal.

Nero has an insatiable sensual appetite. He eats to excess, drinks copiously, and has who knows how many intimate partners of both genders.

Nero has an unbridled lust for power. In order to get on top and stay there he has already, or will soon, murder his mother, two wives, and dozens of political leaders.

A few years from now, in July of the year 64 A.D., a horrific fire will consume ten of the fourteen districts of the City of Rome. Rumors that Nero is an arsonist will spread like wildfire. In an effort to redirect public outrage the emperor will accuse Christians of starting the inferno.

Subsequently, in A.D. 67 Nero will initiate the first empire-wide wave of state-sponsored persecution. He will have some Christ Followers sewn into animal

skins and fed to lions, tigers and bears in the arena. He will have some coated in wax, tied to stakes, and set on fire to illuminate his imperial gardens at night. He will have some crucified, including the apostles Peter and Paul.

Though that is a future event, Nero is no one's idea of a virtuous king. Still, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter instructs us to "**Submit... to the emperor.**"

Is anyone uncomfortable with this? I am!

Does anyone find this a little disturbing? I do!

{Milton} It collides head on with our sin nature. (My old man would rather "**reign in hell, than serve in Heaven.**")

{NH} It conflicts with our cultural values. ("**Live Free or Die**" is American political philosophy in a nutshell.)

It contradicts our human wisdom. (Experience suggests that blind obedience invites tyranny.)

{ECC; 2 Ti 3:16-17} At the same time I profess that Holy Scripture is "**the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.**" I am convinced that this text "**is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**"

We might be tempted to relieve the tension by ignoring the passage, pigeonholing it as a culture-bound teaching without relevance to us, or following orders questions without question. Let's not!

{Heb 4:12; 1 P 1:7, 15} Instead, let's lean into the tension. It can be unnerving; but when we allow the word to penetrate us "**even to dividing soul and spirit**" God uses it to "[judge] **the thoughts and attitudes**" of our hearts –

not to condemn us, but to refine our faith, to make us holy, and to bring "**praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.**"

★ Back to verses 13-14: "**Submit ... to every human authority: whether to the emperor ...or to governors.**" Our basic obligation to worldly government is submission.

However, Peter frames Christian submission in such a way that it subtly, yet powerfully, subverts the kingdom of the world generally and evil regimes in particular.

✈ First, "**Submit...for the Lord's sake**" (verse 13).

We can submit fearfully, to avoid punishment; lazily, to minimize resistance; conventionally, to maintain the status quo; or ambitiously, to win favor or gain power. These might be prudent. Some are morally "good" under the right circumstances. Yet none of them constitute biblical submission!

We are to submit specifically "**for the Lord's sake**" – not for our sake, not in fear or laziness or conventionality or selfish ambition. Doing it "**for the Lord's sake**" transforms submission to an act of witness.

{1 P 2:12} "**For,**" verse 15, "**it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of the foolish.**" He is referring to the abusive speech of "**the pagans**" (and possibly traditional Jews) who are accusing the believers "**of doing wrong.**" Submission "**for the Lord's sake**" disproves those false charges.

It also subversive: though Caesar might settle for outward compliance he prefers (and sometimes demands) inward devotion. Submitting to the emperor “**for the Lord’s sake**” undermines imperial claims on our hearts and minds and exalts the Living God to the highest place.

The phrase “**for the Lord’s sake**” also sets limits on submission. It bans involvement in immorality, injustice, and idolatry. If the law requires sin the right response is to disobey and suffer the consequences.

This requires discernment and self-discipline.

It is not enough that a law is wrong-headed or burdensome or uneconomical. It is not enough that the authorities are incompetent or wicked. So long as their orders do not oblige us to sin, we can and should obey them.

Let us “**submit... for the Lord’s sake.**”

✎ Second, “**Live as free people**” (verse 16).

If this seems to contradict the principle of submission it is only because North Americans envision **liberty**, first and foremost, **as a lack of external restraint**. We see it as freedom *from* interference, *from* outside control, *from* restriction. In the simplest terms, this freedom is freedom *from*.

☆ Scripture, on the other hand, presents **liberty**, above all, **as freedom to serve the Lord**. The biblical authors see it chiefly as freedom *for* obedience to God, *for* love of neighbor, *for* moral transformation. In the simplest terms, this freedom is freedom *for*.

{Selwin} Romans 6:22, “**You have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God.**” “**Christian freedom rests not on escape from service but on a**

**change of master.**” As Peter says here in verse 16: “**Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves.**”

This reinforces the limit on submission: “**as God’s slaves**” we must not obey any law, statute, or regulation that necessitates immorality, injustice, or idolatry.

It also limits sets strict limits on our disobedience. When discipleship requires us to break a law, “**as God’s slaves**” we must not sin against Caesar or his governors – no matter how wicked they are.

Not only does righteousness honor our Master, it subverts the kingdom of the world. An evil regime’s most insidious power is not to take away freedom or kill people; it is to remake them in its own image. Maintaining Christian integrity is the most potent form of resistance.

{1 P 2:23} When Rome commands emperor worship, faithful Christians will not comply; neither will they resist arrest, assassinate key leaders, or stage a coup. They will disobey the law and willingly submit to death – just as the Son “**entrusted himself to**” his Father and “**made no threats**” and “**did not retaliate.**”

Let us be “**free people,**” “**God’s slaves.**”

✎ Third, “**Show proper respect to everyone, love [our] fellow believers, fear God, honor the Emperor**” (verse 17).

{S. Theriault} Political animosity in the U.S. is increasingly intense. Strategies have shifted from

“defeating opponents to humiliating them,” from “questioning [their] judgment to questioning their motives.” **“Show proper respect to”** the other side and your political comrades might well savage you. In 2014, for a Republican to **“honor the [President]”** is to commit political suicide.

Our convictions will determine how we vote. They might energize us to take a stand against certain policies, or run for office. Even then, we are to conduct ourselves according to verse 17.

Our political friends may accuse us of betraying our convictions. That is difficult. Nevertheless, we are **“God’s slaves,”** and our obedience glorifies him and secures his mastery of us.

Conversely, it subverts the kingdom of the world and evil regimes.

They are powered by hatred for particular “enemies,” real and imagined. “[Showing] **proper respect to everyone**” – including those “enemies” – loosens their grip.

They are powered by excessive devotion to nation, ethnicity, class, or political party. Extending αγαπη love to **“fellow believers”** of every nation, ethnicity, political persuasion, and economic class weakens them.

They are powered by the reverence or terror of their people. “[Fearing] **God**” above all others significantly breaks their hold on hearts and minds.

They are powered by the undue admiration of their high officials – but when Peter calls us to **“honor the Emperor”** it is the same verb as when he says to **“show**

**proper respect to everyone.”** Honoring the Emperor like everyone else sabotages their false pretensions.

**Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, 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 the foolish. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love your fellow believers, fear God, honor the Emperor.**

This is the Word of the Lord.