

## “Honor the King”

Peter’s phrase, “honor the king,” in 1 Peter 2:17 is so radical we need to understand it well. It gets to the essence of Christianity. When Peter wrote this, Nero was on the throne (ruling from 54 to 68 AD). He was a psychopath, and he would murder Peter within a year or two. Peter had already experienced Caligula on the throne (ruling from 37 to 41 AD); he was another psychopath. No emperor of Rome during the era of the early Church was what we would call a “*mensch*.” They were power-mad, probably demon-controlled, wicked people who thought nothing of killing others. Yet Peter writes, “honor the king.” What’s this all about?

Peter understood something important about Christianity, which is our identity. As followers of Christ, we are “aliens and strangers in the world” (1 Peter 2:11). We’re not Jews, nor Gentiles, nor Romans or Greeks, but “the people of God” (v. 10). Peter identified as a follower of Jesus. That was paramount in his life, it over-rode all other conceivable identities. Peter also understood the theology of weakness. Jesus was “led like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7), and we’re to imitate Jesus. “If anyone would come after me” Jesus said, “he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:24,25). Jesus submitted to civil authorities, even to the point of death, because He was devoted to fulfilling God’s will and purposes. Same for Paul and the early church. Our eternal salvation, indeed, the cosmic defeat of evil, is precisely because Christ Jesus submitted himself to the brutal civil authorities, which we know from Daniel 2 are God-ordained.

We who follow Christ don’t count our lives as precious, as needing to be preserved at all costs, as pagans do. We anticipate a greater life on the other side of death. More important in this life is to be Christ-like, surrendering our lives to God’s will, trusting Him that as Christ was resurrected, so we will be too. So we can show grace to all people, just as our Father in heaven does. This mind-set frees us from worldly values and attitudes and from earthly concerns.

It doesn’t matter what kind of government we have in America today. It doesn’t matter what the personality or values of our President are, or whether we like him or not. Nor does it matter whether we agree with his policies or not. We are to honor him. Why? And how? Let’s think about these two questions.

We honor the king (our current President, our government leaders) because God says we are to do that (1 Peter 2:17). The Scriptures have God’s authority, which means we don’t have the right to disagree with them. Our only option is to obey them. The king is there to serve God by maintaining order in society. Anarchy is how savages live, not civilized people. The king serves God, therefore he is worthy of honor. Even Satan is God’s servant, and we therefore don’t slander him (Jude 8-10). If the king’s policies oppose God’s revealed will, of course we obey God, accepting that we’ll suffer the king’s wrath for doing that (Daniel 3 and 6). For people to live together in community, each person having his or her own beliefs and values, and for a humanity that’s both under the dominion of Satan and possessing a sin nature, there must be a means of maintaining peace and order. So God ordained government to do that (Romans 13:1,2).

Honoring the king is therefore honoring God. If we speak contemptuously or maliciously of the king, if we exult in our disobedience to him, we dishonor God. If the king’s policies are odious, or not according to our values, in weakness we are to submit to his rule, trusting that God in heaven rules His cosmos in justice and goodness. God, in fact, knew in advance what the king’s policies would be, yet God in total sovereignty allowed the king to ascend to his throne – if God didn’t deliberately place him there as a judgment on the nation.

Our trust is – or should be – wholly in God, the sovereign and absolute Ruler, who is certainly aware of all that is going on in his world. And who has revealed an agenda and purpose for the Church that we’re to be fulfilling. What the king does to or for (or perhaps in our view, against) the people he rules is not the business of the Church.

The problem in America is, we’ve wedded Christianity to Americanism. We’ve got a civil religion that hugely includes nationalism, and we call that Christianity. So Christians are intensely concerned about who our “king” is and his policies, because we want our nation “to be great.” We love our freedoms and our traditions and our American way of life. That’s why if the “king” (the President, Congress, or the courts) doesn’t do according to our liking, what we think he should do, we react emotionally. We refuse to honor the king. It’s sad, but our “Christianity” is an idolatrous hybrid. It’s not biblical Christianity regardless how much we may suppose it is. Even our church leaders have no idea what has happened to American Christianity. We want America to be righteous, to be a “Christian” or godly nation, to fulfill its calling (whatever that is) because we foolishly identify as a responsible American citizen AND a Christian. No wonder our churches are saturated with politics. We’ve lost our identity as a follower of the suffering and despised Jewish Messiah.

Daniel in Babylon was free to honor Nebuchadnezzar. Not because Nebuchadnezzar was a godly man or ruled his nation well, but because Babylon wasn't his home. He was there necessarily in the will of God, but not as a Babylonian. Likewise, believers in China (or North Korea, or Iran, Cuba, Pakistan, or dozens of other countries) today have no illusions about their nation being "great" under communist (or Muslim or Hindu or whatever) rule. Believers in those countries aren't nationalistic or patriotic. That's because they understand that they belong to a different kingdom, Christ's kingdom. They know they'll suffer – perhaps terribly – simply because of their identity as a follower of Christ. They are submitted to a Ruler who is higher than their nation's "king," submitted to His values and to His commands. They are His citizens. They are therefore free to honor their king, because they don't have any need to either agree or disagree with him, or to like or dislike him. They are free to show grace to all. In the same way, Peter was free to honor the Roman emperor, and command us to honor our king.

Ambassadors to a foreign land are free to honor the ruler or government leaders of that land because the ambassador is not a citizen of that land but of a different land. Likewise, missionaries to a foreign land are free to honor the king of that land because they are citizens of a different land. Neither ambassadors nor missionaries have a vested interest in the policies of the land in which they are strangers and aliens.

We're here to identify with the despised, rejected, suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. We're sin-saturated creatures by grace united to a crucified and risen Jesus, the Creator and sovereign God who came in human form to translate us from this world to His glorious Kingdom, to transform us into His likeness, to prepare us for an eternity of blessing in God's presence. Our lives therefore are to be spent in the pursuit of transcendent purposes, not earthly ones. We are citizens of heaven sent here as ambassadors. We're here on mission to invite as many as are willing to join us in the Kingdom of God, which has totally different values, goals, and priorities than American citizenship or good government. We are NOT here to help make America great.

I've been thinking that the Book of Job has a couple of subtle lessons that most expositors miss and are relevant to our topic. And I suspect these are purposely there to establish key biblical values, because Job was the very 1<sup>st</sup> Scripture written, at the head of all revelation. So. Why does God rebuke Job's three friends at the end? After all, what they say seems OK. All thru the huge middle section of dialogues, the three friends say the same thing repeatedly which is, that God is mechanical in judging. God is absolutely just. If you live righteously, God blesses you. If you live a sinful life, do evil things, God punishes you. Job was obviously (to them) being punished, so Job must have done evil. But no! That's not right. The end of Job shows that God also loves His human creatures. And He shows grace. Ah! Grace. The story of the Bible, what the three friends totally missed. And what we miss today as well. I know we do, because we don't want to honor the king. We're not really people of grace, as we should be.

And what does Job learn at the end? He didn't curse God as Satan had predicted. His trust in God remained intact. And God wonderfully rewarded it. Job received unique and special revelation about God. He got to know God better and had a more intimate, knowledgeable relationship with Him. He didn't really know God well before, but at the end he does. Lesson: God rewards our trust in Him – regardless of our circumstances in life. God trusted Job to remain faithful, and Job remained trusting in God even without understanding what was going on in heaven (Chapters 1,2). And God was glorified. We miss this too. We're so bound up with our circumstances as American citizens seeing our government change that we totally fail to see thru the awareness that comes from faith that God is involved. God doesn't merely know what's going on, He's doing it! It's His agenda being fulfilled before our eyes. We're not really people of faith, as we should be. God isn't in our thoughts. And we know little or nothing of trust in Him.

Now. How do we honor the king? Obviously, the first thing is not to bad-mouth him before others. Speaking ill of the king accomplishes nothing except to show how self-righteous we are. It demonstrates dramatically that we know nothing of grace. Another obvious way to honor the king is to obey him. We obey our government's rules and laws as unto God. Only if the king demands obedience in something that's contrary to God's revealed will do we have the right not to obey the king. A major way we honor the king is by acquiescing in what the king does as, in some way, necessary for the furtherance of God's wise and purposeful program for His kingdom (Proverbs 21:1). And there's this: we can seek the king's salvation. We can pray for his salvation, and we can (and should) write letters to him explaining the Gospel, appealing to him to respond with biblical repentance and faith. Not letters demanding this or that policy that we want (or don't want), but a letter that honors him, one that shares the Gospel and seeks his eternal blessing.

The person following Christ honors the king even though that very king is persecuting him or causing him to suffer loss, because we trust God who said, "vengeance is Mine, I will repay." It's our duty and privilege to honor the king.