

Feed My Sheep, 1 & 2 Peter: Lesson 4

Social Relationships

Memory Text: “Above all things have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins.’” (1 Peter 4:8)

Setting The Stage: Although written at that time and in that place to address relevant issues of their day, what Peter and other Bible writers wrote transcends time and culture and finds application for all times and cultures, because what they wrote was inspired by the Holy Spirit. What each time and culture needs to look for in certain passages where it seems the writer is addressing a local situation, is an underlying principle. Once the principles has been discovered, relevant applications of that principle can be made to their day, thus making the Word of God as relevant as if it were written for our day.

To say that the Bible is archaic, outdated, outmoded, or irrelevant is to say that God is subjected to the time and culture that the Bible was written in. That would be akin to putting the great God of the universe into a box. Writing about the house he was building for God, King Solomon declared, “But who is able to build Him a temple, since heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him?” (2 Chronicles 2:6) God is not confined to time and place, and neither is His law and principles.

Because of this reality, we can be thankful that the many issues the Bible tackles offers guidance to all people at all times, including us, who live toward the end of earth’s history. The book of Peter addresses several social concerns that we are all familiar with.

“For instance, how should Christians live with an oppressive and corrupt government, such as what most of them experienced then: the pagan Roman Empire? ... How should Christian slaves react when their masters treat them harshly and unjustly? Though modern employer-employee relationships are different from that of a first-century master-slave relationship, what Peter says will no doubt resonate with those who have to deal with unreasonable bosses...How should husbands and wives interact with each other, especially when they differ on a matter as fundamental as religious belief? Finally, how should Christians relate to the social order when, in fact, the social and/or political order might be decidedly corrupt and contrary to Christian faith?” (Feed My Sheep, Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, p. 30)

Sunday / Church & State

1 Peter 2:13-17; Matthew 22:21; 26:50-53

1 Peter 2:13-17. What is the Word generally telling us here about how to relate to government?

The apostles lived in a society that was as corrupt as today's culture. In many ways it was much worse than any of us in Western nations has ever faced. Cruel tyrants and dictators ruled throughout the region, the institution of slavery was firmly entrenched - everything was the antithesis of democracy. King Herod epitomized the godless kind of autocratic rule when he had the boys under two years old slain in Bethlehem.

Few of us have experienced the sort of economic and legal oppression that the Romans applied to the Jews of their day. Tax rates were exorbitant and additional government-sanctioned abuses by the tax collectors exacerbated the financial burden on the people. The Jews in Palestine were afforded almost no civil rights and were treated as an underprivileged minority that could not make an appeal against legal injustices. As a result, some Jews were in constant outward rebellion against Rome.

We never read in the New Testament of any of the apostles expending any time or energy schooling believers on how to reform the pagan world of its idolatrous, immoral, and corrupt practices via the government. The apostles never called for believers to demonstrate civil disobedience to protest the Roman Empire's unjust laws or brutal schemes. Instead, the apostles commanded the first-century Christians to proclaim the gospel and live lives that give clear evidence to the gospel's transforming power seen in healthy submission to governing authorities.

Peter emphasizes the human aspect of the governing bodies authority (vv. 13, 14), whereas Paul emphasized the divine permission granted them (Rom. 13:1-7). Christians are to submit themselves to "every human institution" in recognition that the authorities that exist are "appointed by God." Except where principle would be violated we should cooperate with written and unwritten laws of society. These verses take in the idea of the Christian not using force against established authority.

It must be noted that we don't fulfill our civic responsibility out of fear of reprisal, but because we willingly follow the example of Jesus when He walked the earth. Jesus complied with civil regulations, even submitting to injustice rather than rebel against established authority.

Matthew 22:21: "And He said to them, 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' "

Matthew 26:50-53: "Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and took Him. And suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his

sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. But Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?"

One of the main functions of government is to maintain order. Christians shouldn't earn the reputation of making life difficult for lawmakers and law enforcement officers. According to Peter, public officials also have the duty to encourage those citizens making valuable contributions to the welfare of society.

Again, the main reason Christian's submit to civil authorities is not for fear of punishment, but because God wants us to (v. 15). And in doing good Christians will "muzzle" the critics who falsely accuse them as "evildoers." "The best way to silence criticism is to provide no occasion for it." This obedience isn't to be given in a fawning way, or as an unthinking brute, but freely, intelligently, and of our own volition (v. 16).

We are called to "honor all," whatever their official position may be. That means that each is to be respected, not necessarily for the man or woman he or she is, but in view of his or her office.

Monday / Masters & Slaves

1 Peter 2:18-23

1 Peter 2:18-23. "A careful reading of these verses reveals that rather than an endorsement of slavery, the texts give spiritual counsel on how to think about difficult circumstances that, at the time, could not be changed.

"...In the highly stratified Roman Empire, slaves were considered a legal possession under the absolute control of their master, who could treat them well or cruelly. Slaves came from a number of sources: defeated armies, children of slaves, or those "sold" to pay off their debts. Some slaves were given great responsibility. Some managed the large estates of their owners. Others managed their owners' property and business interests, and some even educated their masters' children. A slave's freedom could be purchased, in which case the slave was described as "redeemed."

"...It is important to remember that a number of early Christians were slaves. As such, they found themselves caught in a system that they could not change. Those unfortunate enough to have harsh and unreasonable masters were in particularly difficult situations; even those with better masters could face trying circumstances.

"Peter's instructions to all Christians who were slaves are consistent with other statements in the New Testament (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1). They should submit and endure, just as Christ submitted and endured (v. 18-20). There is no credit for those suffering punishment for having done wrong. No, the real spirit of Christ is revealed when they are suffering unjustly. Like Jesus, at such times Christians are not to

return abuse, nor to threaten, but entrust themselves to God, who will judge justly (v. 23).” (Feed My Sheep, Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, p. 32)

What practical applications can we make from what Peter wrote here? Does it mean, then, that we can never stand up for our rights?

Peter’s counsel encourages Christian slaves to consider that by manifesting faithfulness, loyalty, humility, patience, and a forgiving spirit, even toward an owner who had a “twisted mind” (v. 18) there was a very real possibility that they could win the esteem and kindness of their masters.

While slavery is still a real problem in our world today, most listening to my words don’t have this problem. But most of us work and have to live with an employer telling us what to do. It may not be hard to serve a decent and reasonable employer, but a lot of Christian fortitude is required to faithfully serve a crooked and unreasonable one. Nevertheless, an unreasonable employer is no excuse for discourtesy or disobedience. God provides the resources of heaven (courage and serenity) to make our burden easier to bear.

What needs to be kept in mind is that the Christian’s allegiance and loyalty is to a greater Being. We are “slaves” to Christ and as such we are to be obedient to God. The world has every right to expect us to live up to our profession and to conclude that what we do we do because it’s God’s will. In other words, God’s good name is on the line in the way we conduct ourselves. We should never give anyone an occasion to conclude that God’s standard of conduct is inferior to what is commonly accepted by the world. (v. 16)

While we should never invite injury, Christians shouldn’t “fight” for what they consider to be their personal rights, but “fight” for what *is* right. Joseph is a good example of this. Under circumstances out of his control, he determined to do what was right in the sight of God by working diligently and carrying a cheerful and winsome disposition into everything he undertook.

Genesis 39:4: “So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority.”

Tuesday / Wives & Husbands

1 Peter 3:1-7

1 Peter 3:1, 7: “Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives...Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.”

Without a doubt, the concept of honor is the single most important principle for building healthy relationships. It's important for a husband and wife to begin applying it toward each other, children to apply it to their parents, and for parents to apply it toward their children. It even works in friendships. The results of allowing honor to reign can be dramatic and life changing.

During Biblical times, the word "honor" carried a literal meaning that has been all but lost by translation and time. For a Greek living in Christ's day, something of honor called to mind something heavy or weighty. Gold, for example, was the perfect picture of something of honor because it was heavy and valuable at the same time. For this same Greek, the word "dishonor" would also bring to mind a literal picture. The word for "dishonor" actually meant mist of steam. Why? Because the lightest, most insignificant thing the Greeks could think of was the steam rising from the pot of boiling water, or clouding a mirror on a cold winters day.

When we honor particular people we're saying in effect that who they are and what they say carries weight with us. They're extremely valuable in our sight. Just the opposite is true when we dishonor them. In effect, by our verbal or nonverbal statements we're saying that their words or actions make them of little value or "light weights" in our eyes.

It's easy to say you love someone, but when you put a hundred other things ahead of them you're really saying that these things are more important to you than her/him. With honor as a permanent resident in the home our relationship with God and with our loved ones can be restored and soar. Persistent honor has the power to win over the hardest of hearts – particularly as a husband and wife see affirming actions become a consistent part of marriage.

A couple of authors said that honor is a "reflex of the heart toward one who is deeply treasured." It's the conviction that you are in the presence of somebody so valuable it's "ah-h-h-h-h inspiring". It's important to realize too that this attitude doesn't start with a feeling – it's a decision; and the feelings of awe eventually follow.

Have you ever wondered why the dog is considered man's best friend? Think about the way a dog greets his owner. Whether you've been away for a few days, or just went down to the store, the dog falls over himself showing how happy he is to see you. Nonverbally, dogs honor their owners with massive doses of love and enthusiasm. That's probably one reason some people aren't too thrilled with cats. They don't care that you've been away. You may even get a look of disdain, that look that says, "I'm the one who gets honored around here".

In **Prov. 15:30** we're told the smallest act of "ah-h-h-h-h" can have a positive effect on a relationship. When we honor someone, we make a decision that that person is special and important. Honor is not always earned but is given as an act of grace even to those who don't deserve it.

It is you, and me, that make the decision that something is of high value. Does a Chevy pull up to a Mercedes at a stop light and gaze at it enviously, wishing it could be a Mercedes? Does silver cry itself to sleep at night because it's not as valuable as gold? It doesn't care. We're the ones that attach value to a thing, or a person. We choose to honor our husband, our wife, our kids, or our parents.

While honoring those around us, it would be helpful to keep dishonoring acts, killers of healthy relationships, at arm length. Here are some to consider:

1. Ignoring or degrading another person's opinions, advice, or beliefs.
2. Burying oneself in the TV or paper when another person is trying to communicate with us.
3. Creating jokes about another person's weak areas or shortcomings.
4. Making regular verbal attacks on loved ones; criticizing harshly, being judgmental, delivering uncaring lectures.
5. Treating in-laws or other relatives as unimportant in one's planning and communication.
6. Ignoring or simply not expressing appreciation for kind deeds done for us.
7. Distasteful habits that are practiced in front of the family – even after we're asked to stop.
8. Over committing ourselves to other projects or people so that everything outside the home seems more important than those inside the home.
9. Power struggles that leave one person feeling like he or she is a child or is being harshly dominated.
10. An unwillingness to admit that we are wrong or ask forgiveness.

Wednesday / Social Relationships

Romans 13:1-7; Ephesians 5:22-29; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16; Galatians 3:27, 28

Paul also wrote about the same social issues Peter did.

Romans 13:1-7: “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil...Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.”

Ephesians 5:22-29: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also

loved the church and gave Himself for her...So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church."

1 Corinthians 7:12-16: "But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy...For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?"

Thursday / Christianity & The Social Order

Acts 5:27-32

Governments are established to serve the needs of the governed. So they are to ensure the protection of the population's fundamental human rights, including freedom of conscience. The state is also responsible to build communities with public order, public health, a clean environment, and an atmosphere that doesn't unduly inhibit its citizen's ability to raise families and freely explore the facets of their humanity.

It is the state's responsibility to endeavor to eliminate discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, social class, religion, political persuasion, and gender and to guarantee its residents equal access to an impartial judiciary." Someone rightly stated, "The state is not a remedy for sin, but a means to restrain it."

There is no doubt that our responsibility to government is to obey the laws and be good citizens: "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men." (Titus 3:1, 2) We are called upon to honor, respect, and pray for government officials. (Romans 13:1-8)

However, where obedience to the state collides with obedience to the state, with Peter we say: **Acts 5:29:** "But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: 'We ought to obey God rather than men.'" Where state law crosses paths with God's law, we are bound to obey God seeing He is earth's ultimate ruler. With respect and due deference we can decline obedience to man's laws where they cause us to violate God's law.

When it comes to political questions, should Christians bury their heads in the sand, or on the end of the spectrum, resort to activism? During the past 25-30 years, well-meaning Christians have founded a number of evangelical activist organizations and sunk millions of dollars into them in an effort to use the apparatus of politics -

lobbying, legislation, demonstration, and boycott - to counteract the moral decline of American culture. They pour their energy and other resources into efforts to drum up a "Christian" political movement that will fight back against the prevailing anti-Christian culture. But is that a proper perspective?

Christians are first and foremost "ambassadors for Christ" and serve the interests of the King and His kingdom. This kingdom, Jesus declared, "is not of this world." (John 18:36) All our efforts to establish God's kingdom as a temporal dominion are dangerous and non-biblical. Christians don't make the greatest impact on society by pursuing political power but by obtaining genuine spiritual power.

But Christians shouldn't retreat from the world either where we bury our heads in the Bible, preach spiritual truth, and ignore social obligations. Both complacency and Christian activism are ditches to be avoided. They represent two extremes and are inconsistent with the biblical role of the church.

We must remember that moral decline in any nation is a spiritual problem, not a political one, and its solution is the gospel, not partisan politics. We must grasp the fact that our government cannot save us! Only God can. We never read in the New Testament of Jesus or any of the apostles expending any time or energy schooling believers on how to reform the pagan world of its idolatrous, immoral, and corrupt practices via the government.

The church's unique, God-given purpose does not lie in political activism. Nowhere in Scripture do we have the directive to spend our energy, our time, or our money in governmental affairs. Our mission doesn't lie in changing the nation through political reform, but in changing hearts through the Word of God.

When we think the growth and influence of Christ can somehow be allied with government policy, the mission of the church becomes corrupt. Our Christian mandate is to spread the gospel of Christ and to preach against the sins of our time. Only as the hearts of individuals in a culture are changed by Christ will the culture begin to reflect that change.

Political entities are not the savior of the world. The salvation for all mankind has been manifested in Jesus Christ. God knew that our world needed saving long before any national government was ever founded. He demonstrated to the world that redemption could not be accomplished through the power of man, his economic strength, his military might, or his politics. Our experience is to echo the following words: "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will remember the name of the Lord our God." (Ps. 20:7)