

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

First Peter: Truth and Hope for Sojourners

“Responding to Transient Authority”

1 Peter 2:13-25

Take a first look.

I. **A Baptist pastor named Tony Cartledge tells the following story about one of his ancestors:** “The year was 1770, or thereabouts, when a New Light missionary named Daniel Marshall left his settlement at Horse Creek, South Carolina, and crossed the Savannah River into Georgia. Georgia law made it illegal to preach any doctrine contrary to the Church of England, but Marshall was willing to test that law. After meeting with some interested persons in their homes, he gathered a crowd and began a ‘brush arbor’ service near Kiokee Creek. At some point during the service, Marshall was arrested by a local constable, who charged him with the crime of preaching.” Although the identity of the constable is not certain, it was probably Samuel Cartledge. After being arrested Daniel Marshall began to proclaim the gospel and quote Scripture to the constable and his posse. Afterwards they came under conviction and were converted. Those men later served as deacons in the first Baptist church in Georgia, and Samuel Cartledge eventually became a minister, preaching for 63 years. He was on a preaching tour at age 93 and was killed when his horse threw him against a fence post. Ancestor Tony Cartledge asks, “What if Daniel Marshall had regarded his stern captor as an enemy, or had judged him too stubborn to receive the gospel?”¹

II. In this temporary world, we must learn to respond to authority as Jesus would want us to do. We represent Him. His authority is ultimate; all other is transient: here today but gone in eternity.

III. Peter urges us to practice our faith in this temporary world with a proper and godly approach toward authority of all kinds.

Take a closer look at 1 Peter 2:13-25.

I. OUR BASIC ATTITUDE TOWARD TRANSIENT AUTHORITY SHOULD BE RESPECT AND SUBMISSION. vv. 13-14, 18

1. *Peter recognizes that authority as such is from God.* He mentions two categories: kings (or the emperor) and governors, to illustrate that the scope of his teaching covers authority at every level. When he turns to the Christian home or the home in general, he recognizes a similar legitimate authority.

A—First question: What is our basic attitude toward authority? Do you have “Question Authority” on the bumper of your vehicle? This is a common attitude, but it is not necessarily a Christian one.

I—Let me check your knowledge of history: **Who was the emperor of the Roman Empire when Peter wrote these words?**² When Peter wrote these instructions, he sat under

¹ *Baptists Today*, June 29, 1993, p. 15.

² Answer: Nero.

the ominous shadow of the crazed ruler who would one day crucify Peter upside down because of his faith in Jesus Christ.

Nero gained power in Rome through the murderous and adulterous plotting of his mother Agrippina. When he was first declared emperor, she still ruled from behind the scenes. He slept with many men and women, partied constantly, and would often prowl Rome at night harassing women, abusing boys, and occasionally killing passersby just for the perverted thrill of it. He finally had his mother Agrippina murdered when he was in his early 20s and she was 43. Four years after Rome burned, he was overthrown and committed suicide. The ancient historian Suetonius wrote, "The world would have been a happier place had Nero's father not married that sort of wife."³

God would surely have us make a clear distinction between the *position* of those in authority and their *character*. We must respect and submit to the position, as far as faithfulness to God allows, even though we find the character of some of those in authority self-centered and evil.

2. *God has established authority to be a ministry of justice.* Here, Peter echoes the teaching of Paul (see Romans 13:1-7). The civil authorities, and all others as well, are charged with upholding justice: punishing evil and rewarding good—bringing justice to bear on both those who do wrong and those who do right. The word translated "punish" is one that could be translated "bring vengeance." It carries the idea of retribution that is just and right in keeping with crimes of various sorts. This idea justifies the existence of a criminal justice system, but not necessarily all its facets. It also calls those in authority to hold up and commend those citizens whose behavior is right before God.

A—Are any of us in positions of authority: in government, business, Church, school, or home? Do our actions toward those under our responsibility reflect a genuine desire to be just, and to do right by them?

I—Here is a sobering question for those of us who live in this representative republic, asked by Thomas Jefferson: "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberty of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? *Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever*" [my emphasis].

He recognized that the God Who is pure justice holds us, His creatures, accountable for our practice of justice.

I—This surely applies to our role as parents, shaping young lives for the future. Gordon MacDonald has written, "Among the legends is the tale of a medieval sidewalk superintendent who asked three stone masons on a construction project what they were doing. The first replied that he was laying bricks. The second described his work as that of building a wall. But it was the third laborer who demonstrated genuine esteem for his work when he said, 'I am raising a great cathedral.'

"Pose that same question to any two fathers concerning their role in the family, and you are liable to get the same kind of contrast. The first may say, 'I am supporting a family.' But the second may see things differently and say, 'I am raising children.' The former looks at his job as putting bread on the table. But the latter sees things in God's perspective: he is participating in the shaping of lives."⁴

³ Malcolm Forbes, *What Happened to Their Kids?* (Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 17.

⁴ From *The Effective Father*, via *Biblical Illustrator*.

One way of shaping those lives well is simply not showing preference toward one child over the next. Justice. Fairness.

II. OUR ULTIMATE APPROACH TO TRANSIENT AUTHORITY SHOULD BE UNDER GOD. vv. 15-17

1. *All transient authorities yield ultimately to God.* This is a definite limitation to the scope of temporary authority, whether it is in home, church, business, or government. We are called to submit “for the Lord’s sake.” It is He Himself Who sets the terms and the basic approach that is to be practiced by those in positions of authority.

A—We are under orders to obey authority until that authority commands us to sin. Then, we must respectfully decline to obey.

I—The apostles, including Peter, set us a good example here. When arrested for preaching (see Acts 4-5), Peter’s simple and yet profound response to those who commanded them to stop preaching about Jesus was this: “If it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge ...” (Acts 4:19, FJV). When they did not stop preaching about Jesus, all the apostles were rounded up. This second time their reply was even more direct: “It is necessary to obey God rather than people!” (Acts 5:29, FJV).

2. *We, then, are first and foremost servants of God.* Our ultimate authority is God Himself. He is the Legislator of the Higher Law that is always above human statutes. He is the “Judge of all the earth,” in the words of Abraham (Genesis 18:25). “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Abraham asked in that context? Can we not trust Him? Will we not answer finally to Him in the end?

3. *As such, we have these ethical directions:*

a. *Do good.* This should silence (the Gk. word literally means “muzzle”) slander, and ignorant, foolish talk.

b. *Live as free people.* Surely this is a reminder of our standing in Christ. We are free from sin’s consequences, we are being set free step by step from sin’s power, and we will finally be set free from sin’s presence. Live in the freedom of Christ! But remember that it is the freedom “of Christ.”

A—At the very least as free people, we are called to engage our culture for the cause of Christ and for the practice of right living.

I—In Peter’s time, authority was centrally fixed in individuals such as the emperor and at different levels of government. In ours, much authority has been diffused throughout the citizenry. We can vote. We can run for elected office. We can lobby the legislatures, the executives, the judiciary. All of this activity should be for the purpose of establishing a godly, self-controlled society.

I—Never forget the example of William Wilberforce. He was a small in stature but huge in moral and spiritual fiber. He saw his role as a Member of Parliament in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as service rendered to God. He campaigned against the slave trade both on the floor of Parliament and in the culture at large. When he began, London was

well-known for its decadence. Cartoons of the times often showed streets where both children and adults staggered from intoxication by gin. Sexual immorality was rampant and fashionable. It seemed that the entire economy of England was tied to the slave market in some way. During such a culturally and economically entrenched practice such as slavery, he and his friends in the Clapham Sect stood up and said, "This is not right. No matter what it costs us, it must come to an end." It took decades, but they finally succeeded. He wrote, "My own solid hopes for the well-being of my country depend, not so much on her navies or armies, nor on the wisdom of her rulers, nor on the spirit of her people, as on the persuasion that she still contains many who love and obey the gospel of Christ. I believe that their prayers may yet prevail."⁵

This is something of what it means to "live as free people" and at the same time as "servants of God."

c. *Maintain right attitudes.* Verse 17 sums this up in four directives:

(1) *Honor all people* (this should be considered a separate imperative, not the one that sums up the others). This is an essential attitude of respect for all people, no matter at what level of society nor of what character.

(2) *Love the brotherhood of believers.* This is a step above showing respect. This is a call to genuine, self-giving love. This demands earnest effort to bring about the good of one's fellow believers.

(3) *Fear God.* This moves another notch up. Our ultimate awe and respect is owed to God. He is "the Judge of all the earth," and yet the "Savior of all men" (see

(4) *Finally, we must honor the king.* This is the same word, the same requirement of respect, that we should have for everyone. In Peter's time, this was a radical departure. He called for more devotion to the fellowship of believers and to God than to the earthly magistrate. Many emperors called for worship, not just respect. Peter knew better, and so do we.

A—We must represent God well in our attitudes toward others, no matter how we relate to them in this temporary culture.

I—Picture this scene from 1994. Tens of thousands of men have gathered at a large stadium at the University of Colorado. The event is called Promise Keepers. These men have come together to celebrate and to be challenged to live godly lives as husbands, fathers, church members, and citizens. A local militant homosexual group announced that it would come to protest and break up the gathering. The Denver Broncos football team showed up to stand guard on the event. They quietly and yet firmly stood side by side to keep any protesters outside so that the event could take place as planned.

The day was hot and long. The protesters were uncomfortable, as were the football players. Almost imperceptibly, something begins to happen. A few of those oversized guys turned inside to where cookies and punch were located on tables. They helped themselves, then did the unexpected. They picked up trays of cookies and cups of punch and moved toward the protesters. "Anyone like some punch and a cookie?" There it is: stand for what is right, but don't revile in return. Respect the person, even if you can't support their behavior. Love your

⁵ From illustration collection. For the whole story see John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (available on the Amazon Kindle) and Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (HarperCollins, 2007).

enemies; do good to those who do evil to you. Guard your attitude and demonstrate to Whom you ultimately belong, and to Whom you will ultimately give account.

Protests have become more militant and violent in recent years. The murder of **Charlie Kirk** is a significant case in point. One of his well-known statements went like this: “When we stop talking, violence begins.”

III. OUR ACTUAL EXPERIENCE OF TRANSIENT AUTHORITY MAY BE UNJUST. vv. 19-25

1. *When treated unjustly, we should appeal to the structures of authority.*

A—In our time, this involves filing court cases, lobbying the legislature at the state and national level, and appealing to employers for what is just and right.

I—Remember the story of Daniel in the book that bears his name in the Old Testament of our Bibles? What did Daniel do when as a teenager in a foreign land he was commanded to eat food that had been ritually blessed in a pagan manner under the worship of a false god? He appealed for a change in policy. God stood up for him and for his three friends who were courageous enough to stand with him (see Daniel 1). This is the practice of respectful appeal.

I think I told you one time how I was instructed as an employee in a retail grocery business to erase with solvent the freshness dates on packaged meat items so that no one would know that the dates were past. I was shocked that I was being asked to do something that was patently dishonest and against the law. The rationale of my employers had been worked out. “We never had these silly dates on lunch meats in the past, and besides, the meat is certainly still good.”

I respectfully, and with some fear as a college student, said, “I can’t do this. I know that God wouldn’t want me to.” I was not fired (thank God), and I was never asked to do that again. I am sure that my Christian bosses realized that they had rationalized a practice that God did not want them to do, either. They started being a lot more careful about how much lunch meat they ordered.

2. *When treated unjustly, we should examine our hearts.* Here are two questions that we should ask:

a. *Is this truly unjust or are we just facing the consequences for our wrong behavior?*

b. *How should we respond?* Enduring suffering when we don’t deserve it and when we maintain a Christ-honoring attitude brings God’s *grace* up close.

3. *When treated unjustly, we should follow Jesus’ example.* This is the crux of Peter’s counsel and the turning point of the letter. The central and pivotal point of reference for the Christian life is this: what has Jesus done for us? What difference does that make in what I do?

a. He suffered the greatest injustice: He was righteous, sinless, and yet He suffered as the worst criminal would have had to suffer.

b. He did not revile back and did not even make threats. Remember what He did say while on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

A—Ultimately, if Jesus would not have endured injustice, we could not be saved. See vv. 24-25, again.

I—This is the principle embodied in the story told by Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Set during the French Revolution, it is the story of two friends, Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton. Darnay is a young Frenchman who has been thrown in a dungeon to await the guillotine. Carton is a wasted English lawyer whose life has been one of careless reprobation.

At the climax of the tale, Carton slips into the dungeon and exchanges clothes with the prisoner, allowing Darnay to escape. The next morning, Sydney Carton makes his way up the steps that lead to the guillotine. His final words are triumphant:

"I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy, in that England which I shall see no more—it is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

Here is the ultimate tale of two cities: This city of earth is full of injustices large and small because of human self-will and sin. The Prince of the Celestial City has entered it in person. He has gone to the gallows for us, "the righteous for the unrighteous," as Peter will say shortly (1 Peter 3:18). He has taken upon Himself our injustices, our dark-hearted condition. He has paid the price with His blood to set us free.

Take it home (applications).

I. HAVE WE COME TO CONFESS THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS OVER OUR LIVES? The Christian confession of faith is "Jesus is Lord."

II. HAVE WE ENTERED INTO THE FREEDOM THAT SUCH FAITH BRINGS?

1. We must admit our self-will, the stubbornness of heart that causes all of us to think that we must run our own lives.

2. We must believe in the Good News: Jesus took our punishment upon Himself at the cross.

3. We must confess Him as Lord.

III. WE MUST LIVE AS SERVANTS OF GOD!

1. ... With an attitude of respect toward authority,

2. ... With a will to make a difference in this society where only those who get involved can make a difference,

3. ... With a willingness to pay the price of faithfulness to Christ, no matter what it may be.