

How We Talk about Government

1 Peter 2–3

Turn to 1 Peter 2. How do we talk about our government? People have been talking about government as long as I've been alive, and it started long before that. It picked up a few years ago because of a controversial president in the USA, and it increased again because of Covid-19.

This is a delicate topic, I know that, all the more reason to make sure we know what God has said to us. I preach to myself. I have fallen short of these Scriptures many times recently.

Who We Are and Where We Are – 1 Peter 2:9, 11; 5:13

2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

2:11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.

5:13 The church in Babylon, chosen with you, sends you greetings.

Who are we? We have put our trust in Christ, and call him Lord, and that makes us a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's special possession, all so that we can declare his praises. That's **who** we are.

Where are we? We are foreigners and exiles in Babylon. Peter wrote from Rome, he was in Rome at this time. But he calls Rome "Babylon." Babylon is the biblical symbol of humans organized against God. Genesis 11 tells us about the tower of Babel. In Hebrew, it is plainly "Babylon," not "Babel." I don't know why it is always translated "Babel."

From Genesis to Revelation, Babylon is humans planning together against God, an evil city, an idolatrous, arrogant, bloodthirsty city. Peter wrote this letter to several provinces of the Roman empire. Peter says exactly one word about the government – "the church in Babylon greets you."

We are God's chosen people, a holy nation, and spiritually speaking we are all foreigners and exiles in Babylon. That's who they were and where they were. It's who we are and where we are.

Basic Instructions: Submit to Babylon, Honour the Emperor – 1 Peter 2:11-17

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

We are God's chosen people, his special possession, and God cares intensely how his enemies see us. God knows they will attack us, whether we do right or wrong.

But he wants to have a conversation with them at the End. God wants to say to them, "Were my people not honest? Hardworking? Kind? Were they not cooperative and generous? Did they give you any good reason to attack them?" And on that day, God's enemies will have to say, "God, you are right, they were good people, they gave us no reason to attack them."

That conversation is an OT theme and a NT theme. We live now so God can speak like that to his enemies at the End of time. We live so that God can say truthfully that about us.

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. We are foreigners and exiles in Babylon, submitting for the Lord's sake to Babylon's emperor, and to the governors he sends.

It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. How? Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

This instruction begins with "submit," and it ends with "honour." Submit to the emperor of Babylon, and honour the emperor of Babylon. We do this because of the Lord, because it is the will of God, because we are slaves of God. God says "submit to them, and honour them."

Abstain from sinful desires which war against the soul, says Peter. What sinful desires does Peter have in mind? He tells us: our urge not to submit to human authority, not to honour the emperor of Babylon. That's the apostle Peter writing from Babylon. Peter's not worried about us compromising with the govt. He's worried about us compromising with our sinful desires.

In Acts 4 this same Peter said, "we must obey God rather than men." I like that line, because I like to have God's support when I disobey authorities. But notice: in Acts 1, Jesus showed himself to the 11 disciples many times, proving he was alive from the dead. And in Acts 1, Jesus told the 11 that they must announce his resurrection to the world.

Jesus did not say that to the 120, who were also in Jerusalem in those days, just to the 11. And in Acts 4 the Jewish leaders told the apostles not to speak openly about the death and resurrection of Jesus any more. At that point Peter said, "we must obey God rather than men."

There are two things none of us must ever do: we must never worship another god, and we must never deny Jesus the Lord. Outside of that, Peter is clear. Cooperate with Babylon, submit to Babylon, honour the emperor of Babylon, because it is the will of God, we are his slaves.

So we will not be surprised when our government acts like Babylon. Actually, in many ways our government is much better than Babylon, and for that we will thank God.

Vaccination: people avoid vaccination for many reasons. Here's one we should not use: let's not avoid vaccination because doing just what the government wants will offend God. (2x) That does not offend God. God says to us, "You are MY slaves, you answer to ME, and it is MY will that you submit to the authorities, and honour the emperor of Babylon."

I find this stark, and surprising, and uncomfortable. Often enough I myself have not lived according to God's will. But that is what it says, so let's be God's slaves.

The Silent Example of Christ – 1 Peter 2:21-23

And now: how we actually talk about govt: *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not return insult; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*

The Gospels give us detailed stories of our Lord's arrest and trial and crucifixion. One of the reasons they do that is so we, who follow Christ, will learn how to act when things like that happen to us. God calls us to this very thing, to suffer as Christ did, to follow his example when we suffer as he suffered.

And here is Peter's point: nothing bad came out of the Lord's mouth. They insulted him, but he said nothing in return, they caused all kinds of pain, but nothing dark came out of his mouth. God calls us to follow this very example.

Isa 53:7 says: *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*

I always thought this silence meant that when they beat Christ and whipped him, he did not cry out; when they pounded nails through him, there was no scream of pain. I believe I heard it preached that way. But that's not what Peter says. Peter says it means Jesus never complained or grumbled, he never condemned or judged his tormentors. He was silent.

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. He was silent. What did he do instead? He entrusted himself to Him who judges righteously. He put himself in the hands of his faithful Father. He's our example.

Did Jesus Always Live like This? – Matthew 21, 23

But what about Jesus clearing the temple? In Matthew 21 we read that Jesus chased out those who were in the temple area, selling and buying sacrifices for Passover. He turned over the tables of the money changers, and the chairs of those who sold doves. He told them the temple was supposed to be a house of prayer, not a hideout for thieves.

And in Matt 23 the Lord spoke at length against the scribes and Pharisees, showing why they were not good spiritual leaders, and why God’s judgement would come on them.

Here are two things to remember about these stories, the clearing of the temple, and the condemning of the scribes and Pharisees. One, these are both unusual behavior for Jesus. If we use Jesus as our example, actions like this will be totally out of character for us.

Two, in neither case was Jesus acting or speaking against the government, in both cases Jesus went after the spiritual leaders and teachers. People went to the temple to worship God, but the priests had allowed the buying and selling to corrupt the worship of God. So on one occasion, Jesus completely interrupted their buying and selling, and he explained why.

If you think your church has corrupt worship, once in a great while you could get up and tip over the music stand. Come take the sermon manuscript out of my hand and throw it out the door. And stand up and condemn the elders of the church for serving themselves not God. That would be the equivalent, so long as it was rare for you.

That’s about spiritual leaders. But Jesus did not talk about government. Herod arrested John the Baptist, and later executed him. Jesus said nothing, did nothing. Jesus said false prophets were vicious wolves, speaking of the church teachers. Once Jesus called Herod a fox, one word, an ambiguous word, that’s it. He called Herod a pest.

In Luke 13, we read about the brutality of Pilate the Roman governor. Jesus knew about that. Jesus said nothing about the Roman governor Pilate. Jesus said nothing about the Roman occupying army, except “pay your taxes to Rome.”

During Jesus’ trial, Pilate sent him to Herod. Herod was curious about Jesus, asked him many questions. That would have been a good time for Jesus to preach at Herod, don’t you think? Jesus never said one word to Herod. Did not open his mouth. So Herod’s soldiers beat him and humiliated him, then sent him back to Pilate.

How Did Jesus Usually Speak to Scribes and Pharisees?

In Mark 3 we read that the leaders were watching to see if Jesus would heal a man with a withered arm on the Sabbath. Jesus tried to reason with them. “On the Sabbath, is it lawful to do to good, or evil; to save life, or destroy it?” But they were silent. Jesus looked at them and Scripture tells us that he was furious with them, and distressed at their hardness of heart.

Then Jesus said to the man, “stretch out your hand,” and he healed him. End of story. Jesus said nothing to his enemies. Occasionally he called them hypocrites, often he was gracious. The Matt 23 speech against the scribes and Pharisees was rare for Jesus.

How Did Jesus Usually Act in the Temple? – Matthew 26:55

We get the answer to this in one line. The evening when Jesus was praying in Gethsemane, Judas brought a crowd, armed with swords and clubs, to arrest Jesus. Jesus said to them, “*every day I sat teaching in the temple, and you come to me at night with swords and clubs?*” What had Jesus been doing all week in the temple? Sitting and teaching.

Then Jesus said that Scripture predicted he would be treated in just this way, which means it was the Father’s will. It’s not about the corrupt authorities, my brothers and sisters. They were corrupt, but Jesus made it about God, the will of God.

Jesus said: “*Don’t condemn, so you won’t be condemned. The way you judge, you will be judged. The measure you use will be the measure you get.*” Matt 7:1-2.

Peter’s Last Word: Called to Repay Evil with Blessing, so we Inherit a Blessing – 1 Pt 3:9

Do not repay evil with evil, or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called, so that you may inherit a blessing.

Evil and insult will come, that is a given. God called us to repay evil with blessing, so that we will inherit God’s blessing. Peter quotes Psalm 34 for support.

“Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil, and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their prayer.”

Let’s put ourselves in the hands of our Faithful Creator, and let’s continue to do good. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, the Scripture tells us to pray for our leaders, so we pray for them. Watch over them, keep them safe. Guard them against the attacks that comes against them every day. Guide their minds and consciences, so that they will know what is right to do, and give them courage to do what they know is right. Help them to get along with each other. Bless them and be gracious to them. Thank you that we have govt to keep order, Father, and protect us. It would be very bad for us if they all walked off the job. Thank you for the freedoms we have always had in this country. And one more thing: help us with our tongues, O God. Help us control our mouths. May we respond with blessing and kindness, and if not that, then at least silence. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven-fold Spirit before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.