

Today I want us to pay attention to three specific areas of the Christian life from Peter’s instructions and encouragement here in chapter 2. Peter highlights three ways to live before God, in the world, and with one another. They are: **1) Live good lives. 2) Live as free people. 3) Live as God’s servants showing proper respect to everyone.** 1st *“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”* (v. 12). One of the basic themes of Peter’s epistle is Christian conduct. He constantly reminds us that God is not merely concerned with our *profession* of faith. God is concerned with our *possession* of faith—our way of life. If we live holy and honorable lives, our conduct will be seen by unbelievers and by God’s grace will lead to beneficial results for them.

In fact, others will not only see our good deeds, but our honorable lifestyle may result in them *glorifying* God too! Peter echoes the teaching of Jesus when the Lord said, *“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16). Peter says in verse 15 that *“by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.”* As Peter continues the theme of living good lives before others, he provides examples of how this kind of lifestyle can be manifest in everyday living.

He begins by saying that *“for the Lord’s sake”* (and I want to emphasize that important phrase) **we should submit ourselves to every human authority** (v. 13). This should be done in the case of government leaders, whether national, state or local, any civil leader. **Of special note is one leader in particular that Peter names—the emperor.** Remember that Peter is writing during the reign of Nero. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Emperor Nero ordered Christians to be covered in pitch, oil, and flammable materials, then set on fire to serve as torches for lighting his gardens at night. Peter is firmly urging that we should do all that we can to obey civil authorities—even Nero! However, it doesn’t mean we ought to violate the “higher laws” of God or forget the

lordship of Jesus Christ. When Peter stood trial before the Sanhedrin in Acts 5, he said, ***“We must obey God rather than human beings.”*** When human laws conflict with God’s laws, we *must* side with God, perhaps even requiring our civil disobedience. Jesus is Lord! We are his servants, citizens of *his* kingdom!

2nd Live as free people (v. 16). Jesus Christ has invited us to enjoy a life of freedom. Only in him can we be truly free. When we know him, we know the Truth that will make us free (John 8:32). But the freedom that comes from Christ is not to be used as *“a cover up for evil”* (v. 16), an excuse for sin. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh”* (5:13). The freedom that comes from Christ cannot be used as an excuse for sin. As soon as we misuse it, we will lose it, and once again we’re entangled with slavery to sin. Authentic freedom is ours only when we walk in the Spirit, when Jesus reigns as Lord.

The highest calling of life is to use our liberty as servants of Jesus Christ (v. 16). The freedom and liberty that come from Jesus continue to flow as we serve him and serve others—as we continue in the flow of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Freedom misused is like a mighty river flooding its banks and bringing terrible destruction upon everyone in its path. Freedom used in humble service is like a mighty river flowing within its banks bringing life and refreshment to all who drink its waters.

3rd Live as God’s servants showing proper respect to everyone (vv. 16—17). Peter continues his teaching on the important subject of being servants of God by listing several specific examples of how to do that. Again, remember that he is writing within the context of acute suffering by his brothers and sisters in Christ at the hands of the Romans and the religious rulers of Israel. **Yet this is his main thrust: *“Show proper respect to everyone”* (v. 17).** The word *“respect”* here in verse 17 is the same word Jesus uses in telling us to *honor your father and mother* in Matthew 15:4 and that we should *honor the Son even as we honor the Father* in John 5:23. This is the mark of an authentically Christian way of life—that we **respect** all people as our Lord

does. We never violate others or use them as objects. **We are called to love and respect everyone.**

Peter also says in verse 17 “*Love the family of believers.*” Agape love must flow freely and generously from the lives of all true Christians. It is another mark of an authentic Christian way of life that we love one another. As Jesus said, “*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*” (John 13:35). Peter also says in verse 17 to “*fear God.*” To fear God is to revere or reverence him—to stand in awe in his presence. Some people think that this biblical word doesn’t mean to be afraid of God, but it does mean that too—literal fear, to be put in fear or fright, to be afraid. It’s the word that describes the *fear* of the disciples in John 6 when they are crossing the lake alone in a boat and a storm arises, and they see Jesus walking on the water (6:19). **They were terrified!** To have genuine *fear of God* is one of the things sadly missing in most churches today. We’ve made God too tame, too familiar. We have tended to create God in our own image—the man upstairs, the good guy, or the good Lord. We need to see the Lord high and lifted up in all of his glory and might, and then bow in awe and wonder before him in his presence, to revere him and worship him.

Squeezed into this already full verse 17 is another call to “*Honor the emperor.*” The same word is used here for “*honor*” as is used earlier in verse 17 in encouraging us to “*show proper respect to everyone.*” It’s natural for us to honor a good person in authority whom we respect. **However, Peter is asking Jesus’ followers to honor no one less than Nero himself.** That’s another mark of an authentic Christian lifestyle—to love and honor even the tyrants of our world, those who may abuse us or persecute us, as Jesus notes in Matthew 5. We Christians simply cannot follow Christ without being servants to all people. **To submit is to be subject to.** Followers of Christ are servants, and servants are to submit to others “*in reverent fear of God*” (v. 18). Here is another immensely important qualifying line for us to remember if we are to follow this challenging way of life. In 1 Peter 5:5 the apostle says that all Christians are to submit themselves to their elders and to one another with humility (5:5).

Peter implies that it is quite easy and natural for us to be submissive and obedient to employers who are good to us and treat us well. In fact, it is a very real temptation to take advantage of such employers. But Peter's message is to remind us that when we work for others, we should not do more merely *to please them* but rather we should work *as unto the Lord*. In other words, we should not merely do what is expected of us by kind and gentle employers. We should do our very best to please God. To submit to employers who are good and generous is not difficult, but verse 18 also instructs us to submit to those in authority who are harsh. To be whipped or beaten into submission is one thing, but to submit by one's own free will to a harsh taskmaster is realistically impossible without the Lord's help. Peter is not talking about something that's natural. **He pushes us to practice the life of the Spirit—a supernatural life.**

Such conduct is "*commendable*" because it requires that our attention to God is the motivation for our behavior (v. 19). **Peter writes with directness and honesty when he asks the rhetorical question, "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and you endure it?"** (v. 20). His inference is clear—that such a response is expected from earthly authorities and by society. However, there is a dimension of Christian behavior which goes far beyond that which is *expected* by others and is *pleasing* to God. That is when we do good and suffer for it and endure it patiently. This is "*commendable*" behavior before God (v. 20). This sort of behavior not only brings glory to God but also has the potential of reaching others around us with the love of God in Jesus Christ. Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 20 in this way: "*What counts, is that you put up with it for God's sake when you're treated badly for no good reason...If you're treated badly for good behavior and continue in spite of it to be a good servant, that is what counts with God.*"

When we live "supernaturally" in relationship with inconsiderate people, harsh parents, argumentative siblings, it is made possible because Christ suffered for us, leaving an example for us to "*follow in his steps.*" Peter isn't calling his brothers and sisters in Christ to go looking for undeserved suffering. But he does remind us we have a higher calling whenever we suffer for doing good.

Followers of Jesus keep serving God and our neighbors, even when others make us suffer for it. Christians patiently put up with unjust suffering, because our Savior did.

Thomas More was England's Chancellor during the reign of the insufferable Henry VIII. After he was convicted of failing to support the king as head of the Church the authorities unjustly sentenced More to be executed. Some say it was his finest hour in a life filled with days, months and years of far less than moral finery. Just before More's execution, he prayed, *"Almighty God, have mercy on all that bear me evil will and would me harm and make us saved souls in heaven together, where we may ever live and love together with thee and thy blessed saints."*

Peter's target audience today may be those of us in a position of relative strength. He's not calling us to go tell the elderly or the children, the poor or the hungry, or the refugees among us, to just put up with injustice. Instead, the apostle invites all of us who have options for responding to unfairness anywhere we encounter it, to walk in the way of Jesus—to bear unfair treatment that we may face. But additionally, I hear him summoning us to speak up for those who face unjust treatment if they were to attempt to speak up against the way they are being treated.

Peter invites the followers of Jesus to respond to more than just our personal suffering. It's also about people who make others suffer in ways we don't deserve. Peter suggests a way to respond to those who make themselves our enemies, like tyrannical governments, people who promote policies with which we disagree, unfair employers, or maybe just people who have made foolish decisions that have painful consequences for the people around them. **People who follow Jesus don't treat people in ways they deserve.** Jesus' followers treat them as Jesus treated those who unjustly treated him: with forgiveness and compassion. Verse 17 holds the key for every single situation we must face.

It comes down to this: **Show proper respect to everyone!** Amen.