Submitting as Exiles
1 Peter 2:11-17

We're looking at Peter's first letter - a letter he wrote to help Christians live in a pagan culture that's becoming increasingly hostile. And in today's passage you get a taste of that hostility: v12, 'when they *speak against you* as *evildoers*'.

'You Christians aren't just different, and what you believe isn't just wrong, it's hateful, it's harmful, evil.' And Peter's not exaggerating. As we saw last week, Tacitus, the Roman historian, described Christians as 'haters of humanity' while Suetonius and Pliny the Younger, described Christians as followers of a 'mischievous' and 'depraved' superstition.

I don't know if you've seen, but following the resignation of the First Minister of Scotland, one of the contenders to replace her is a committed Christian. And no one seems to doubt her abilities, what she's being attacked for is her faith and her views on marriage and sexuality. As one professor of politics put it, someone with beliefs like hers would be 'difficult to swallow.' We can't have someone like that, who believes stuff like that, being given power and responsibility.

Now, that's mild in comparison to what Peter and his friends were beginning to face. But when you do face that kind of opposition, what do you do? One option is to hide, isn't it? To keep your views and religion out of the public square, to privatise your faith. And that's certainly what our secular culture wants Christians to do. The irony of course is that the reason they want that is so that their own beliefs can fill the square.

But there's another response, and that's to go on the attack. That in the face of hostility, we fight fire with fire. And become more strident, and angry. And in certain sectors, the idea that Christians should be taking the battle to those *we* think are evildoers has gained traction. But are they right?

Well, it's to help Christians wrestling with just those dilemmas that Peter writes. And his response is neither withdrawl, or war. It's a call to beauty; to live such lives that win our enemies.

But before he gets there, he begins by reminding them who they are.

Your Identity
Look at v11, 'Beloved…' I love you, Peter says, but, more importantly, God does too. Others may be calling you evildoers, but God calls you 'my beloved.' That's who you are.

But then he goes on, v11, 'I urge you as *sojourners and exiles*…'. Now, as some of you know, a great tragedy has befallen our family and two of our daughters have married Germans. And now Katie, our youngest, actually lives in Germany. And last weekend we visited her and Clemens. And for 24 hours, there we were living in Germany. But that didn't make us Germans. We might eat the same food as Germans, würst, and drink the same drink, beer, but *our* country was across the border and we'd get back there soon enough.

And Peter's saying, as you live in this pagan culture, remember you're a foreigner, a temporary resident. And this isn't your home country, your citizenship has changed. Now, you're citizens of another city.

A few weeks back Su, Hannah and I hiked up to a refuge in the Jura in the middle of nowhere. And we got there at exactly the same time as a group of 5 elderly, local Swiss men. And we sat and ate lunch with them. And when they discovered we were British one of them asked me, accusingly, 'did you vote for Brexit?' I think he thought I was personally responsible. And I said, 'no, I don't live there, so it's not

for me to vote.' But then I added, 'But I do now have Swiss nationality, so I get to vote here virtually every week.'

And Peter's point is, your nationality, your identity, your citizenship has changed, so let that change your values, priorities, the way you live. Verse 16, 'Live as people who are free… living as servants of God.'

Remember back in chapter 1, v18, where Peter said, 'you were ransomed…'? Your freedom has been bought, the price to deliver you from the power of sin has been paid. And paid at infinite cost, v19, 'with the precious blood of Christ'. You are free!

And yet, Peter says, you're also a servant, a bondservant, a slave, of God.

But how can you be both a slave and free? That's a total contradiction, isn't it?

You see, we tend to view freedom as freedom *from* something, don't we? Wars of *independence* are fought to be free of people like the British, typically. Feminism wants freedom for women, from 'husband, children and home', from the patriarchy. The civil rights movement wants freedom from racial oppression. And the guy who refuses to settle down wants to be free from commitment. It's always freedom *from*.

But that's only half the story, the Bible says, because whether you acknowledge it or not, something's always going to be your master. Something's going to be controlling the way you see life and live life. It could be some grand political ideal or something as basic as wanting everyone to like you. But whatever it is, something's going to be pulling the strings of your heart. And at the most basic level, the Bible says, it's either going to be God, or something that takes God's place. Even if that something else is your determination *not* to be controlled, not to be constrained, not to submit - it's *that* that's controlling you.

But now, Peter says, when you become a Christian, you change masters. Christ has bought you and he owns you. And others may be calling you evildoers, but what you really are is beloved and free, *and* a servant of God living in a culture not your own. Let *that* identity change the way you live and especially, in this moment, the way you respond to pressure.

Your Life

Now, when your beliefs are being attacked, or you're being seen as a threat to society, where might you be tempted to think the battle lies? Who's the enemy? Where should you aim your fire?

You see, when you're living in a culture awash with paganism, and sexual immorality, and people are turning on you, then or now, it's understandable to think, *they're* the enemy.

And yet, that's not how Peter sees it. What he says is that when hostility's growing, the first battle field that demands your attention, is our own hearts. Verse 11, 'Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which war against your soul.'

Now, despite what you might be thinking, Peter's got more than sex in mind. He's got *wrong* passions, and *right* passions that you're seeking to fulfil in wrong ways, and *'too strong passions'* - good things that you want too much so they start controlling you, in mind.

Why? Why address what's going on in our hearts *before* doing battle with wrong philosophies of life? Because, when you're feeling under pressure for your faith, or just plain stressed by life, or when others are saying unkind or untrue things about you, the desires of the flesh - to vindicate yourself and get even, or desires for intimacy and comfort and pleasure; to regain control, or maintain the good opinion of others - can seem all the more enticing, and your resistance to them all the less, as they tell you, 'look, you're being attacked, you're stressed, and you are suffering for what's right, but *this* will make you feel better. This will sort them, or sort you.'

But ultimately, Peter says, those desires that offer you life bring death. They offer you peace, but bring war. So, abstain from them, Peter says. Verse 12, 'Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.'

So, as Tom Schriener writes, "Peter does not summon believers to a verbal campaign of self-defence. [Instead,] He enjoins them to *pursue virtue and goodness*.' In other words, Peter says, you're being accused of doing evil, so show them the opposite. By the quality of your life, show them how Christ transforms your life.

But did you notice how Peter describes their conduct? Verse 12 again, it's '*among* the Gentiles'. *Among* your pagan friends and neighbours. So if it's not *war* against others, neither is it *withdrawl* from the public square. In response to hostility, the answer is not to privatise your faith and go quiet. It's to live such good lives among them that they take notice. You see, when Peter says, so 'they may see your *good* deeds'. He uses a word for good, *kalos,* that doesn't just mean good, but beautiful. He's talking about a life that's got a rightness, a goodness, a nobility about it that's attractive, that's beautiful.

And as you live like that, in the words of Ed Clowney, your life 'will be a witness to them, or a testimony against them.' Because when Peter says, 'they may see your good deeds *and glorify God on the day of visitation',* does he mean the day of judgement or the day when God visits your friend or colleague to open their heart to believe in Jesus? And the answer is, probably both - because that phrase is used in the Old Testament for God coming in judgment, but it can also mean God coming in blessing. So whether it's on the day of judgment and those who don't believe will have to admit that all along you really were doing God's good works, or whether they come to faith now, through your good example, God will be glorified through you.

Which all sounds great, but what does a life like that look like? Well, Peter tells us, and it may surprise you, because it's not helping old ladies across the road, it's submitting yourself to authority.

Your Attitude

Now we live at a time when attitude - how we think about and speak about others - dominates the public square. This week, one UK politician spoke about his *loathing* of a member of the opposite party. Not his loathing of his policies or politics, but of the man himself. It's a snap shot of how right and left despise each other and polarisation has become endemic.

What passions of the flesh, what desires, or over-desires might be driving that level of animosity? And I ask that because, in the next section of this letter, Peter addresses areas where you might experience conflict as hostility grows: in the work place, in marriages and families, and in churches. And his repeated phrase is 'be subject to', 'submit to'.

But he starts with politics, with civil authorities: v13-14, ‘Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him.’

So, you’re a free citizen of another king and another country, but that doesn’t mean you live however you want. Verse 16 again, we live ‘as servants of God’. And that means, Peter says, we’ll submit to the authorities our King has put in place. They’re not our King, but because God is, our disposition is going to be to obey them and serve them because he’s put them there.

It’s why Calvin said, the Christian life is ‘a free servitude and a serving freedom.’ It’s why Martin Luther said, ‘A Christian is the most free lord of all and subject to none; [and yet] a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone.’

But how do you respond when you hear that? Do you sense just a bit of resistance rising inside you? ‘Submit to godless government, no way!’ Or maybe you don’t just feel it, you do it. Like, you break the speed limit - ‘because I know there are no speed cameras on that stretch of road and they don’t tell me how to drive!’ Or you do your tax return in a way that, deep down, you know falls on the wrong side of honest.

So, why, instead of a disposition to submit, do we sometimes sense a resistance to it?

I want to give three possible reasons.

Firstly, there’s a sense in which civil authorities imposing laws, and penalties for breaking laws, is unnatural. They weren’t a part of Eden. They didn’t exist before the Fall. Structure and authority did, but not human authority addressing human law-breaking. That only became necessary after the Fall, as part of God’s common grace to keep sin in check. As Peter says in v14, their role is ‘to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good.’ So when you think, ‘all these rules and fines and red tape, life shouldn’t be like this’, you’re right, it shouldn’t. But what you’re longing for is God’s kingdom. And we won’t see that fully until Christ returns.

But a second, more common, reason is that we just don’t like people telling us what to do. We want to decide for ourselves what’s right and wrong. The problem is, that was the reason for the Fall in the first place. It’s why Peter starts by addressing those ‘passions of the flesh’ (v11) because one of them is pride, and pride’s endemic in our culture, on right and left: I want to be my own emperor, my own governor, my own authority, no one else can tell me how to live. I’m free.’ And Peter’s saying, no you’re not, you’re enslaved by your pride, by your over-desire for control, for liberty from others and by your passion for autonomy.

And as he puts it in v16, when we react like that we’re using our ‘freedom as a cover up for evil.’ Instead, when Christ sets you free, Peter says, you became a servant of God. He’s your master. And as you serve him you cultivate an attitude of submission to those he’s placed in authority.

But there’s a third reason you may feel resistance rising, and that’s that you see authorities inverting their God given responsibility, and instead of punishing evil and praising good, they punish the good and praise the evil, and are we *really* supposed to submit to *that*?

But, Peter wasn’t naive to that, was he? I mean, he knew better than us the corruption of power in the Roman state. And he’d seen crowds flock to Jesus hoping Jesus would overthrow that power, only to see those crowds disappear when it became clear Jesus wouldn’t. And he’d seen Jesus crucified under a

Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, the same kind of governors he tells his friends here to submit to. And when Peter wrote this, Nero was the emperor, and everyone knew, including Peter, that Nero was no paragon of virtue or promotor of democratic liberties.

So, how are you supposed to submit to people like that? In three ways:

Firstly, we submit as an act of worship. Verse 13, 'Be subject *for the Lord's sake* to every human institution…' So we submit to human institutions, like governments, because the Lord's our king, not them. So we obey the speed limits as worship, we pay our taxes in full as worship, we follow the regulations on where we can park and how late we can party as worship.

Because to submit to them is not the same as to worship them. You see, when Peter says be subject 'to every human *institution*' that word translated *institution* is the word for *creature*. So the emperor and governor and presidents and prime ministers are creatures, not the Creator.

And that means that while human authorities may have God-given authority they do not have ultimate authority. And so, as Wayne Grudem writes, we're to submit to them up to the point they command us to sin and worship them.

But of course, Christians may not always agree when that line is crossed. Which is probably why Peter urges them in v17 to 'Love the brotherhood'. Because when your community is under pressure *externally*, it's easy for cracks to appear *internally*, and drive wedges into those cracks. Instead, Peter says, cement those cracks with love.

Secondly, we submit by showing them honour. Look at v17: 'Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor.' So, as Christians, we're going to have an attitude of honouring everyone, including emperors and kings and presidents and prime ministers and politicians.

Great, you might say, but what does that *mean*? Well, firstly, what it *doesn't* mean. It doesn't mean you have to love what they love or agree with what they do. We're to love *the brotherhood*, Peter says, but *honour* the emperor.

And to honour them doesn't mean you submit to them out of slavish fear. Fear *God*, Peter says, and honour the emperor. And the time might come when to obey God will mean you disobey them, as happened with Peter's friends and the command to worship the emperor. But even then, Peter says, you still honour them.

Ok, but if that's what it *doesn't* mean to honour them, what does it mean?

Look again at v13, 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor *as supreme*…' And that word *supreme* is the same word Paul uses in Philippians 2:3: 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility *count others more significant than yourselves.*'

What does it mean to submit to emperors and presidents and prime ministers and officials? It's that we think of them as more significant than ourselves, and as we do we want we to do them good.

And we do that because, whatever their views, they're image bearers of God, and we honour that by treating them as that. And we honour them because of the roles entrusted to them. We honour them, and

we honour the office. And, as Tom Schreiner says, 'Even the most oppressive still serve some role in keeping evil in check and preventing a collapse into total anarchy.'

But ***Thirdly, we submit to them as exiles.*** I urge you, Peter says in v11, '*as… exiles*' to 'be subject…' (v13). And when Peter thinks 'exiles being subject to pagan authorities' he's almost certainly thinking of Israel in exile in Babylon, and God's word to those exiles through the prophet Jeremiah, to seek the welfare of the city where God has placed you.

How do you submit? As an exile, Peter says, as men like Daniel and his friends did, by serving and seeking the good of the city where God has placed you. Verse 15, 'For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.' So our civil obedience is one means of silencing the talk of those who don't really know what they're talking about.

And, even if they do punish the good, we still do the good, and seek the good. And that, according to Paul, is one way of overcoming evil: Romans 12:31: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' Which he immediately follows with 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.' So how do you work to see evil overcome? By the quality of your life, by good works, and the beauty of those, *and* by a disposition to submit to and honour those whom God has appointed.

Ok, but why should you *want* that be your disposition, and why should you *want* to abstain from the passions of the flesh when it would be easier to go for comfort or indulge yourself, or take them out?

Your Reason

Firstly, because we desire something more than the desires of the flesh. The novelist Flannery O'Connor wrote, 'Always you renounce a lesser good for a greater.' And more than our comfort, more than proving ourselves right, we want, as Peter says in v12, to see God glorified - glorified by those who aren't Christians becoming Christians, because they see something in us that's attractive.

Is that just naive? No. It's what won the Roman Empire for Christ. Because people began to notice, hang on, we're killing the Christians, but who are our best citizens? Who feeds the poor? Who stays in the city when the plague hits to care for the dying? Who picks up and adopts the babies we abandon? It's them.'

It's your life that makes the claims of your faith plausible. And as it does it brings glory to God - and you want that.

But secondly, because Christ did it for you. You see, when Paul talks in Philippians 2 of counting others more significant than yourself, the reason he gives to do that is that that's how Christ considered us. And our king humbled himself, and he became subject, and he submitted to the injustice of Pilate, and said to him, 'you would have no authority over me if it were not given you from above.' And he didn't lash him with his tongue, he took the lash of the whip. And he didn't grasp for a sword, he took the nails. And he took them for us.

And instead of pouring down judgment on them, our judgment was poured upon him. And he honoured us, by counting our lives worthy of saving, when we *were* evildoers.

Let the way he treated you transform the way you treat others. Even, and especially, those who oppose you.