

## Living Under Authority

1 Peter 2:13-25

A man in a hot air balloon realized he was lost. He reduced altitude and spotted a woman below. He descended a bit more and shouted, "Excuse me, can you help me? I promised a friend I would meet him an hour ago, but I don't know where I am."

The woman below replied, "You're in a hot air balloon hovering approximately 30 feet above the ground. You're between 40 and 41 degrees north latitude and between 59 and 60 degrees west longitude."

"You must be an engineer," said the balloonist. "I am," replied the woman, "How did you know?"

"Well," answered the balloonist, "everything you told me is, technically correct, but I've no idea what to make of your information, and the fact is I'm still lost. Frankly, you've not been much help at all. If anything, you've delayed my trip."

The woman below responded, "You must be in Management." "I am," replied the balloonist, "but how did you know?"

"Well," said the woman, "you don't know where you are or where you're going. You have risen to where you are due to a large quantity of hot air. You made a promise which you've no idea how to keep, and you expect people beneath you to solve your problems. The fact is you are in exactly the same position you were in before we met, but now, somehow, it's my fault."

In this letter Peter is talking about how we set a godly example in a pagan society. It could be subtitled "how to live as Christians in a non-Christian world".

Jesus talked about this during his sermon on the mount. He encouraged his followers to be salt and light and said:

Matthew 5:14-16

... <sup>14</sup>"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

This is such an important principle to Peter's readers because they were living scattered among unbelievers. The Christians were in a minority and their unbelieving neighbours were inclined to spread lies about them. Peter urges the Christians to prove them wrong with similar words to those of Jesus.

Peter says:

<sup>12</sup>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.

In this letter Peter has already spoken about living holy lives because we are supposed to be the holy people of God. He has already spoken about us being 'living stones' and aligning ourselves to Christ

who is the cornerstone. Now Peter continues this theme by outlining the way that Christians should set a good example in the way that they relate to authority.

First of all Peter says they should submit themselves to the authority of the king as supreme ruler. In our case this would be the Queen or perhaps Gordon Brown as Prime Minister or maybe even Boris Johnson as Mayor of London. These are people whose job it is to rule over us. To have people in these positions of supreme authority is important. The book of Judges is a horror story of Israel's history as they face difficulty after difficulty. The reason for this is given right at the very end of the book:

Judges 21:25

<sup>25</sup> In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

Another translation says:

"...all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." (NLT)

Of course people have different ideas on what is right. You may have seen the TV show "Argumental". If you've not seen it, basically there are two teams (red and blue) and one of the teams is given a statement that they have to argue, for example "cats are better than dogs". They then have to make a case to the audience as to why cats are better than dogs. Afterwards the other team have to argue the opposite (that dogs are better than cats). Then the audience decide on which team made the best case.

We all think differently depending on the things that interest us, our values and even our experiences. Whether cats are better than dogs is just a trivial example, it doesn't really matter. But there are of course differences of opinion in some very important matters.

For example, what is your opinion on the speed limit? Some people would like us to drive round everywhere at 20 MPH claiming that our roads would be much safer. Others argue that the speed limit on main roads should be raised to 40 MPH especially as most cars now are able to stop much faster than they could when the 30 MPH speed limit was put in place.

- So let's take for example, Cranbrook Road. Hands up if you would like to see the speed limit reduced to 20 MPH.
- Hands up if you would like to see it raised to 40 MPH.
- Hands up if you think the 30 MPH speed limit is right.

You see, if we had no central rule, our roads would be a free for all and even in this room, we would all be driving at different speeds and London drivers would be even more angry than they are now. It is better for all of us to have a governing body that decide on the rules that we all have to stick to, even if we don't necessarily agree.

Peter says that we should submit to the authority of governors "who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right."

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says:

Romans 13:1-6

<sup>1</sup>Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

<sup>2</sup>Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup>For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. <sup>4</sup>For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup>Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup>This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

There is a lot of debate at the moment about the new body scanners that have appeared at our airports. These scanners apparently show a naked image of you as you pass through. The idea is that if you have weapons concealed in your clothing, the scanner will be able to see it clearly. Some see this as an invasion of privacy, others say there is nothing to be concerned about if you are innocent. Paul is making a similar argument here; "rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong." Interestingly, Paul says the rulers are God's servants. In Paul's view they have been placed in positions of authority by God and therefore we should respect their God given positions.

Of course, this didn't always go well for Paul so this wasn't as easy a statement for Paul to make as it may sound. There was some real substance behind the words. Acts 16 records a time when Paul and Silas were put in chains by the authorities. If you remember they had come across a girl who had a spirit that enabled her to see into the future. Paul eventually commanded the spirit to leave her in the name of Jesus and it did so. But the slave girls owners then realised they would now lose money and so they accused Paul and Silas of unlawful practice.

Because of this Paul and Silas were beaten and then thrown into prison. That doesn't necessarily show submission to the authorities, they had little choice in the matter. But consider what happened next.

Acts 16:25-28

<sup>25</sup>About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup>Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. <sup>27</sup>The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup>But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

To be honest, if that had happened to me, I would probably have thought that the earthquake was from the Lord and it was God's way of rescuing me and I would have probably run out of the prison thinking that I had a fantastic testimony. But Paul doesn't see it that way. Now he does have the choice as to whether to submit himself to the authorities or whether to run for it. After all, he hasn't actually done anything wrong. But he stays and what's more, so does everyone else. Paul and Silas had obviously made a big impression on the other prisoners and indeed on the jailer, who, as a result of their actions, gave his life to Christ.

This is exactly what Peter is talking about. By our actions it is possible to be a positive witness for Christ and you may well win them over.

Peter also takes this a step further by saying that slaves should submit to their masters, even if they are harsh.

<sup>18</sup>Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

It's fairly easy to respect a manager who treats you kindly and work hard for them, but what about a manager who treats you unfairly? It is much harder to work hard for a manager who is unkind and unfair but Peter says regardless of this, we should submit to their authority and allow God to be their judge and ours. Peter here almost implies that we should be glad if we are treated unfairly because it first of all gives us an opportunity to witness in the face of adversity. Did you know that throughout history some of the times when the church has grown most of all has been during times of extreme persecution. A major factor in this is the strength of the witness of someone who is being treated unfairly and yet refuses to bend from their Christian values. When others notice this they can't help but notice that there is something genuine here that is worth enduring suffering for. And so the church grows as people see the genuine, unshakable faith of Christians. Secondly, Peter says you are commended by God for such behaviour.

Jesus said the same:

32 "If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! 33 And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! 34 And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return.

35 "Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. 36 You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.

(Luke 6:32-36)

Jesus said when we maintain our Christian values even when we get nothing back in return and even though our kindness may be repaid with unkindness, we show ourselves to be children of God who does the same.

Peter also emphasises the fact that in this way we follow in the footsteps of Christ who himself submitted to the authorities even though they treated him unfairly and had him tried and flogged like a criminal even though he had done no wrong. Throughout the trial Jesus did not challenge their authority, he submitted himself to it, even to the point of death. When we submit to the authority of those over us, we follow in Christ's footsteps and we are commended by God.

Of course there are times when we need to challenge authority. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3) are a classic example of this. King Nebuchadnezzar ordered the people to bow down to his golden statue and worship it, but Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused. They disobeyed the direct orders of the king. Daniel is another example (Daniel 6). This time it is king Darius who is coned into making a decree that no-one is to pray to anyone other than him. Of course Daniel does not obey this and continues to pray to God.

Of course, Peter himself did not always bow to authority either.

In Acts 3 we see Peter and John meeting a crippled man whom they heal in the name of Jesus. This all causes quite a stir in the end with many people becoming believers as a result and in chapter 4 we see the rulers getting very nervous about all of this.

<sup>16</sup>"What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup>But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

<sup>18</sup>Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup>But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. <sup>20</sup>For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

(Acts 4:16-18)

A little further on in the story it says this:

<sup>25</sup>Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." <sup>26</sup>At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

<sup>27</sup>Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. <sup>28</sup>"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

<sup>29</sup>Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"

(Acts 5:25-29)

That is the key to all of this. We should obey the authorities that God has put in place but when obeying human authority means disobeying God, then we need to obey God rather than people.

Our prayer is that human authorities are guided by God.

Through the prophet Jeremiah God said:

<sup>7</sup> ...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

(Jeremiah 29:7)

So we should support those in authority where we can, submit to them and most importantly, pray for them.