



THE GOSPEL AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

1 Peter 2:13-17

If you have this Word that will stand forever, I want to invite you to open with me to 1 Peter 2. Feel free to use the table of contents if you need to in your Bible. I want to do something different on a couple of different levels for a couple of different reasons. So one of the things I want to do different is to take us to a passage of Scripture that's actually outside of our Bible reading from this last week and that will be different from what we've done just about every Sunday of this year.

And then another thing I want to do different is I want to split up our time into two different parts. Biblical truth and cultural application. What I want to do is to spend the first part of our time together briefly considering the primary truths that we see in 1 Peter 2:13-17. And then, much in the way of meditation, I want us to let these truths from 1 Peter soak into our minds and our hearts and our lives, specifically in the culture that we live in right now. And the reason I want us to do this is, well, it pertains to something that happened in our culture this last week.

On Monday, the Supreme Court of our country ruled on an extremely important case regarding religious liberty. It's already being called a landmark case by many because of the effect this case will potentially have for many years to come. And the effect this case potentially could have had for many years to come if the court had ruled in a different way. So I'm referring to the case regarding Hobby Lobby and Conestoga Wood—two privately owned corporations who had sued the government over the contraception mandate authorized under the Affordable Care Act, a mandate that required these companies to provide, to pay for insurance coverage that includes specific forms of birth control that may cause early abortions.

So both of these corporations are owned by Christians who have a conscientious objection to providing that kind of coverage based on their biblical beliefs about God and life. And the Obama administration had threatened major fines upon these corporations if they didn't comply with this mandate. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court where, on Monday, in a 5-4 ruling, the court decided that the government had unfairly burdened the consciences of these owners. They concluded that the government can't force closely held corporations to violate their religious beliefs by purchasing abortion-causing drugs.

This ruling was huge on a number of levels. On one level because it established that leaders of closely held corporations like this have the freedom to apply their convictions to the way they lead their corporations. And then, two, because if this case had gone the other way—a ruling against Conestoga Wood and Hobby Lobby—would have been a direct hit on religious liberty that would have set precedent and would have had an almost inevitable effect on every man and woman in this room.

Some may think that's an overstatement, but let me just bring this home to you. Imagine you're a follower of Christ who believes the Bible, which I assume and hope many, if not most of you are. And you're driven by a desire to love God, and flowing from that to love

others. And imagine you happen to be a professional photographer, and one day a woman in this community contacts you about her upcoming event. This woman says to you, "My female partner and I are celebrating our commitment to one another in a formal ceremony, and we would like for you to photograph it." And immediately, your mind starts racing. "What do I say?" You think to yourself, and you begin processing your personal convictions.

On one hand, you want to serve this community, including the different types of people who are in this community. You've built an entire business on using your talents to bless people, just like the woman who's making this request. However, at the same time, your love for others is a subset of your love for God, and you know, you believe God has designed marriage as the union of a man and woman for the demonstration of His character, the display of the gospel in the world. And as a result, you have a hard time conceiving how you can participate at all in a celebration of something you are convinced God Himself condemns. You can't escape the thought that your participation in this would violate your conscience. On a deeper level, in your heart, you can't avoid the conclusion that your participation would dishonor your God.

So in speaking to this woman, you decide to politely decline. And as you do, you find yourself resting in the free exercise of religion that has been granted to you in our country. But then imagine your surprise when you discover you're being sued for your decision, and further imagine your surprise when you learn that the government on which you were resting for this free exercise of religion tells you that the law actually requires you to compromise your conviction in this kind of circumstance.

So this is not an imaginary scenario for Elaine Huguenin, co-owner of Elaine Photography in Albuquerque, New Mexico. A woman asked Elaine Huguenin to photograph her commitment ceremony with another woman. Huguenin politely said that she does not photograph such ceremonies, and this woman, despite finding another, cheaper photographer for her ceremony, filed a complaint with the New Mexico Civil Rights Commission, claiming that Elaine Photography was guilty of discrimination. And the court ruled against Elaine Photography and ordered Elaine Photography to pay a stiff penalty. Now, this case became all the more concerning when it eventually went to the New Mexico Supreme Court, which upheld the ruling against Elaine Photography in a unanimous verdict. The justices ruled: "When Elaine Photography refused to photograph a same-sex commitment ceremony, it violated the New Mexico Human Rights Act in the same way as if it had refused to photograph a wedding between people of different races."

Now, obviously, that statement exposes a fundamental flaw that comes when we equate ethnic identity with sexual activity, which is an increasingly common way to think across our culture. But even more than that, just, I want you to hear the alarming reasoning behind this unanimous ruling. Listen to these quotes. One justice wrote that Elaine Huguenin and her husband are "compelled by law to compromise the very religious beliefs that inspire their lives."

It went on to say, "The Huguenins are free to think, to say, to believe, as they wish; they may pray to the God of their choice and follow those commandments in their personal lives wherever they lead. The Constitution protects the Huguenins in that respect and much more."

"But," the court went on to say, "... in the smaller, more focused world of the marketplace, of commerce, of public accommodation, the Huguenins have to channel their conduct, not their beliefs, so as to leave space for other Americans who believe something different. This," the court said, "is the price of citizenship in our country."

So get this: the highest court in the state of New Mexico ruled that, while Elaine Huguenin is free to exalt her God in the church she attends, she is not free to express her beliefs in the business she owns. In other words, she's free to practice her faith in private for a couple of hours at the start of every week, but she is forced to deny her faith in public for multiple hours every other day of the week. In the end, Elaine Huguenin is compelled by her government to violate her conscience and dishonor her creator as a citizen in her culture.

So that's just another example, similar to what owners of Hobby Lobby and Conestoga Wood were facing. And my hope in sharing even that example is to bring home the importance of this issue to every single person gathered for worship. This is not just an issue for owners of major corporations. This is about photographers and people in all sorts of professions—without question, more and more, all sorts of employees and employers. Doctors, pharmacists, school teachers, administrators, insurers, investors, ministers, ministries are facing governmental mandates, requirements, to provide goods and services that may contradict one's personal convictions.

And even as I say this, I want to offer a caveat that my aim is not to be an alarmist. But then the more I've thought about this issue—I've thought about this issue a lot—the more I'm convinced we need to be alarmed. By the narrowest of possible margins, the Supreme Court of our country just ruled that we have the freedom to apply religious conviction in our everyday lives and leadership. And if one vote had been different, then this freedom would have been taken away by our government, which is the other reason why I want us to dive into this text. We've spent the last weekend celebrating our freedom—this freedom we have in our country. But I'm convinced that we're fooling ourselves if we don't realize that this freedom is, in many ways, in peril.

I want you to know—I want us to know—how the Bible addresses issues like this. So, in light of this being July 4th weekend and this case coming down from the Supreme Court, pastorally, I believe it would be helpful for us to pause together and think through, as the body of Christ, how to apply biblical conviction in a rapidly shifting cultural landscape.

Just one more thought before we dive into the biblical truth here. This is an important issue, not just because our freedom is being threatened in different ways and others' freedom is being threatened in different ways. This is an important issue because in a democratic government like ours, you and I are responsible for protecting ours and others' freedom.

So what I mean by that is somebody might say, "Well, we should just be like Jesus and submit to whatever the government says. Jesus stood before Pilate, for example, silently, and He took His punishment. That was the cost of obedience. So we don't need to get all-consumed with this. We just need to endure what is happening, even what's coming."

Without question, we do need to be like Jesus. We're going to talk in a minute about the cost of following Christ in our culture, but we need to realize, even in that example of Jesus and Pilate, we're not just Jesus. We're also in the position of Pilate. In a democratic republic, we're the ones who elect leaders who make laws, and so we don't just need to think about this in order to know how to respond to increasing persecution. We need to think about this in order to make sure that we are not persecutors—that we are praying and working for religious liberty in our culture and not just for Christians, for that matter, but across our culture.

So I want us to read 1 Peter 2:13-17. We're going to read it slowly, and then we're going to meditate on it. Let this text and the truth it contains soak into our minds and our hearts and our lives, specifically in this culture. Let me pray before we read these words. Let's pray.

Oh, God, we want to hear from You. I want to speak only according to what You have spoken. God, keep me, I pray, from sharing my thoughts or my ideas or my opinions. Help me, I pray, to accurately represent Your Word. Help us to clearly hear Your Word, and then help us to apply Your Word by Your Spirit to how we live in this culture and at this time. We trust that You have sovereignly put each of us in this culture at this time for Your name's sake. So we pray, and amidst all we hear in our culture and all that's going around us—even shifting around us—You would help us. Give us clarity, even now, to hear by Your Spirit Your Word and to walk away from this place in obedience to it. So help us, we pray, in Jesus's name. Amen.

Biblical Truth ...

Okay, this is the Word of God. First Peter 2:13:

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 to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

All right. Biblical truth from 1 Peter, and the reason I wanted to go out of our regular Bible reading this last week to this book in particular is because this a book written by Peter to a group of Christians who were experiencing persecution in first century Rome. And they were wondering, "How do we relate to this Roman government around us?"

This Christ-less government—how should they respond to it? Should they ignore? Should they disregard the government altogether? Should they fight the government in different ways? Should they just be quiet and do whatever the government says?

We've got to remember, even in light of what we're reading, for example, in Joshua right now in our Bible reading, that part of the Old Testament is dealing with a theocracy—a government led by God as King. When we get to the New Testament, God's design is not to organize His people in a theocratic government. But, as people are scattered, 1 Peter 1:1 calls Christians "exiles," living in the middle of worldly government for the glory of God.

We are submissive citizens of a government.

Which leads us to the first truth that we see here in 1 Peter 2:13-17. Very simply that we are submissive citizens of a government. We are submissive citizens of a government. From the very start of this passage, Peter's point is clear. As followers of Christ, we are to subject ourselves to human institutions and the authority that they have in our lives, particularly, Peter says, to emperors and governors who are over us. This is God's will, verse 15 says.

The key word here is "submissive." We're to submit, to subject ourselves willingly to the government around us. This is really an astonishing command, and it is a command. But it's astonishing, when you think about it. Peter is writing this letter to Christians during the time of either Emperor Claudius or, probably more likely, Emperor Nero, but both of whom were completely ungodly. Even setting themselves up as gods. Nero persecuting and killing Christians. And Peter says, "Be subject to this emperor as supreme and the governors sent by him. Do this for the Lord's sake. This is the will of God."

Now, in saying this, Peter is echoing what Jesus Himself had taught. We don't have time to turn there right now, but in Matthew 22:15-22, where Jesus was asked whether or not it was in accord with God's law to pay taxes to Rome and, specifically, the poll tax to Caesar—a tax that was especially despised by the Jewish people. Jesus gave a famous response in verse 21 of Matthew 22, when, after He had asked for a copy of a coin with Caesar's likeness on it, Jesus said, *"Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."*

So Jesus is clearly not teaching that His followers should disregard government. Instead, government's there for a reason, and there are some things, Jesus says, that are rightfully due to government. And so paying taxes was not just permissible; it was morally obligatory for followers of Christ to pay taxes, even to a pagan king. This is huge! I mean, Jesus is saying in an age of pagan emperors, an open persecution of God's people, that they should pay taxes. Without question, we who live in a free and democratic society are commanded to do the same. We are submissive citizens of a government, who render to government what government is due according to the will of God.

Peter is also reflecting here what we see in Romans 13. So you might want to write down Romans 13:1-7, where Paul describes government as a servant of God, ordained by God for the good of people. So Paul opens with a similar statement. Romans 13:1 says, *"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,"* because God has set them up as an authority for this reason.

So this should be in your notes—these reasons evident in Romans 13 as well as 1 Peter 2 here. Government is given by God for the restraint of evil. Emperors and governors, Peter says, are sent by God to punish those who do evil. Romans 13:4 says the government is *"the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."* So government is given by God to restrain evil, to punish evil. Government is given by God for the promotion of good. First Peter 2:14 talks about governors being sent to praise those who do good. Romans 13 talks about how government is given by God for our good.

So this is what governments are set up by God to do—to restrain evil and to promote good among their people. And, as such, people are to submit to government. Followers of Christ are to submit to government as a rightful authority set up by God.

Again, realize that Peter and Paul are saying this in an openly decadent Roman empire that's filled with idolatry and immorality and the abuse of women and child infanticide and homosexual activity and on and on and on. And both Peter and Paul say that Christians must be submissive citizens of civil government.

We are free servants of God.

Now, Peter goes on to say that we do this precisely because (second truth for your notes) we are free servants of God. First Peter 2:16: *"Live as people who are free."* And he's not talking about political freedom here; he's talking about spiritual freedom. Christians have been freed from sin and its penalty and its power.

And then listen to this: this freedom means that we are servants of God (end of verse 16). So that may sound like an oxymoron—a free servant—but it's not, because in Christ a Christian is no longer in bondage to sin. He or she is free from bondage to sin in order to live the life God has created you to live.

For non-Christian friends, please don't mistake what is primary in our gathering. Over and above any political freedom that we enjoy in this country, there is a much, much greater

freedom that is available to us, and this freedom does not come from a government. This freedom comes from God Himself. The whole story of Scripture is a story about a people created by God who have turned away from God to ourselves, to sin and disobedience to God. John 8:34, Jesus says that all of us are slaves to sin and ourselves driven by our own desires away from God. But the good news of the Bible is that God has not left us alone in our slavery to sin. He has sent His Son to live a perfect life that we could never live and then to die the death we deserve to die. He has paid the penalty and price of sin, death, on our behalf, so that anyone anywhere who turns from themselves and their sin and trusts in Jesus as Savior and Lord will be freed from sin and all of its penalty and all of its power and reconciled to God forever and ever. To freely enjoy His grace and exalt His glory.

So we invite you, if you have never put your faith in Christ and experienced freedom from sin and its penalty and its power, to do that. And when you do, and for all who have, so follow this. Now, we're free to live the life God's created us to live. So Peter says, "We use our freedom in Christ, then, to model good lives."

Verse 13: "*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution ... [verse 15] For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.*" He continues, "*Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.*"

So here's the picture. As a result of what God has done in our lives through Christ, we're now free servants of His—free to live, not as evil men and women, but as good men and women. Doing good. When Peter talks about silencing the ignorance of foolish people, he's talking about silencing slanderous attacks against Christians by non-Christians in the culture around them. Peter is zealous, in a Matthew 5:13-16 way, for Christians to be salt and light in the culture around them, so that non-Christians can see their good deeds as good citizens in a culture and bring glory to God in heaven.

So we use our freedom in Christ, not in an evil, selfish way, but in a humble, selfless way, modeling the goodness of Christ in submission to governing authorities around us, over us. We use our freedom in Christ to model the life, and we use our freedom in Christ to show God's love. So Peter closes this paragraph with four short commands in verse 17: "*Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*"

So how do we show God's love in the culture around us? We honor everyone, especially our leaders. Notice how the commands to honor both starts and ends verse 17. The picture is followers of Christ showing respect, attributing dignity, assigning value to everyone, even non-Christians who disagree with them or outright oppose them. We honor them as people made in God's image and, therefore, who are worthy of respect. Honor everyone.

And then Peter closes this verse by saying, "*Honor the emperor,*" as if to say, "him too," or, "him especially." Even this man who has set himself up as god over you, who leads this government that rules over you, he is a man made in the image of God, and therefore he is worthy of your honor. So we honor everyone, especially our leaders.

Second, we care for the church. Specific mention of the church: "*Love the brotherhood,*" this family of brothers and sisters who make up the body of Christ. We see a priority here much like we see in different places of the New Testament, not just on reflecting the character of Christ in the culture around us, but displaying the love of Christ to the church within us, around us. We're in this culture together. We need each other, so we love one another. We honor everyone. We care for the church, and, ultimately, we fear God.

And this is key because all of the above must be understood, seen under the umbrella of fear for God. The text is clear. You don't fear the emperor. You don't fear governors. You don't fear men. You fear God alone. It's clear, here at the close of this passage, that even submission to the government, as important as that is, ultimately must be done in the context of fear for God.

Peter says this later. Look at the next chapter, chapter three, verse 14. We'll start in verse 13. He's talking about those who are suffering in the culture around them, facing attacks because of their faith in Christ. Verse 13 says:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

So don't miss this. First Peter is making absolutely clear that governing authorities, including the emperor, do not hold absolute sway over our lives. Only God does that. Peter—follow this—is obviously not advocating submission to government regardless of what government says, because—put this together—believers in Christ are first and foremost, over and above everything, servants of God. And if the government prescribes something evil, then the Christian is not obligated to do evil. Why not? Because the Christian ultimately fears God.

Just think about even the language in this passage that we have read, verse 13-17 back in chapter two. We're to subject ourselves to governing authorities "for the Lord's sake," verse 13 says. For the Lord's sake, we're to obey the will of God, verse 15 says. Certainly, Peter is not advocating committing sin for the Lord's sake or advocating sin because sin is somehow the will of God. Put this whole passage together, then. As Christians, we are free servants of God. We're free from sin to model good lives, to show God's love, and as free servants of God, we're inclined, we want to submit to governing authorities. We want to submit to them, because they're set up by God for our good. At the same time, in circumstances where the will of God and the will of government are in direct opposition to another, i.e. when the government is commanding or requiring or prescribing believers to sin, then the believer in that circumstance honors its government and its leaders but, ultimately, the believer obeys God no matter what that means. Why? Because, ultimately, the believer fears God. That's the biblical truth, the biblical picture that's taught and portrayed here in 1 Peter 2:13-17.

Cultural Application ...

So based on that biblical truth, how do we apply this truth in the culture in which we live right now. In light of all that's going on in 2014 in our country, our culture—cultural application—this is where I want us to meditate on this truth. So to let what we've just seen soak into our minds, our hearts. We understand what it means for our lives in this culture.

I'd put at least four applications down here, and there are so many other applications that could flow from this text. We could literally go on for hours, but these are just four ways

this truth applies to the way we view religious liberty in our lives in this culture. So follow with me.

We believe religious liberty is not primarily a political issue; it is a gospel issue.

First, as the church in this culture—as brothers and sisters who believe this Bible—we believe religious liberty is not primarily a political issue; it is a gospel issue. This is so important. And I know there are some people thinking right now, “David, I thought you didn’t speak on political issues. Why are we talking about this?” And if you’re thinking that, I just want to affirm what you’re thinking. I have no desire to give political speeches. That is not my job, nor do I want that to be my job. But when we address as a church issues like abortion, for example, we’re not addressing abortion as a political issue. Far before abortion is a political issue, it is a gospel issue. Abortion is an issue that deals directly with the character of God and the sinfulness of man, our need for Christ, and how faith in Christ compels us to action in a culture of abortion around us. And religious liberty is similar, which is why I don’t see this as a political speech but as a biblical sermon, because the Bible address this issue.

So think about it. In light of what we’ve seen in 1 Peter—really, in light of the whole of Scripture—we know and we believe that freedom of religion is ultimately given by God, not just granted by government. I mean, another way to phrase that: freedom of religion is ultimately given by God before it’s ever granted by government.

All right, we see this in the beginning of the Bible. When God creates man and woman, he gives man and woman a choice of whether or not to obey or disobey him. God does not force faith upon His creation. We talk often about God’s sovereignty over all things, and God is sovereign in all things. But God’s sovereignty never negates or removes man’s responsibility. We all—every one of us—has the choice of whether or not to obey God or to disobey God, and we have that choice because God has given it to us. This reality’s seen in the ministry of Christ, who came to earth and invited people to receive Him and, at the same time, allowing people to reject Him. Some listened to Him; others reasoned with Him; some argued with Him; many disagreed with Him. Ultimately, they all abandoned Him to a cross, but He didn’t come forcing faith on people. In fact, in Luke 9 He rebuked His disciples for their desire to call down condemnation on Samaritans who were rejecting Him. In the next chapter, Luke 10, Jesus encourages His disciples to respect people’s freedom to reject Him.

We see this in 1 Peter. We honor everyone. Why? Because as men and women made in the image of God, all people have the capacity and the opportunity to choose to obey God or disobey God. Therefore, based on this biblical, theological foundation—gospel foundation—therefore, it would not be right for you or me or any government to force faith upon people when God Himself does not force faith upon people.

Just think about it. Faith in its essence cannot be forced. In other words, faith, in order to be faith, can’t be forced. Faith in and of itself is a willful decision in the human heart to believe or not to believe in someone or something. Augustine, early church father, rightly wrote that “when force is applied, the will is no longer aroused. One can enter the church unwillingly; one can approach the altar unwillingly; one can receive the sacrament unwillingly; yet, no one can believe except willingly.”

Does that make sense? Because you can be forced to come into a church. You can be forced to take this or that. But you can’t be forced in your heart to believe something. Faith in its essence can’t be forced. We choose to believe. Religion is a matter of voluntary choice, not involuntary coercion. And this applies to all religion, not just Christianity. All people

everywhere in every country and every culture are made in the image of God, and God Himself has granted them the right to choose how they will respond to Him. And we honor people by protecting that right.

So see it. Religious liberty—not primarily a political issue; primarily a gospel issue. The gospel itself comes with an invitation to choose to receive or reject Christ. Jesus says, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened. I will give you rest.” And you have a choice whether or not to come to Him or to go to Muhammad instead or to worship Buddha or to reject the very idea of God altogether. God has created you with that choice.

We work for religious liberty for all.

Which is why, then, second application: we work for religious liberty for all. So we work for religious liberty, because we believe it’s important. It’s how we honor people. By honoring the choice people make, faith can’t be forced. And we do this for all, so we don’t just work for religious liberty for Christians. We don’t just work for the owners of Hobby Lobby and Conestoga Wood and Elane Photography to have religious liberty. We work for Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and atheists and everybody else to have religious liberty. This is really important.

Years ago, I signed a document along with a host of other religious leaders called a “Manhattan Declaration” that spelled out various convictions concerning marriage and life and sexuality and religious liberty. And the end of that document states:

[We will not] bend to any rule purporting to force us to bless immoral sexual partnerships, treat them as marriages or the equivalent, or refrain from proclaiming the truth, as we know it, about morality and immorality and marriage and the family. We will fully and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar’s. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God’s.

And I was criticized by some people, because some of the signers of this document were or are not Christians. But that’s just it. The gospel compels us to work for religious liberty not just for Christians. And for that reason, I gladly stand for religious liberty alongside people who don’t believe what I believe. I don’t believe I’ll spend eternity with all of these people I signed this document with in heaven, but I am more than willing to go to jail for them on earth. And I say this because I know God gives men and women the freedom to pursue or deny Him as they please. So we work for religious liberty knowing—so follow this—knowing that religion exists to explore the questions of life and apply our conclusions to life.

One of the marks of our maker upon our hearts is the ability to explore truth about who He is and then to live in light of what we’ve determined. It is an essential part of what it means to be a human, made in the image of God, to ask and answer questions like, “Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? How should I live?” To ask those questions and then to act in accordance with our conclusions. Religion exists to explore those questions, apply those conclusions while government exists to protect this fundamental human privilege.

This is part of the good design of God for government. It’s what’s reflected here in 1 Peter and places like Romans 13. It’s good for men and women to freely explore and apply faith, which is why you just pause and you think why the founding fathers of our country did what they did. The “Declaration of Independence,” which we celebrated this week: “We hold these truths to be self-evident [innate] that all men are created equal; that they’re endowed

by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

And then it goes on to reflect exactly what we’ve seen in 1 Peter 2 and Romans 13—that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men. In other words, the purpose of government is to protect the innate rights and privileges of its people. Which is why, then, you get to the Bill of Rights and the first words read, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Now, why, over and above any other right, everything else in the Bill of Rights, would that be first? And the answer’s obvious. Freedom of religion is foundational for every other freedom. Just think about it. If the government can mandate what you believe or if government can deny you the opportunity to live within your beliefs, then where will its reach end? What then keeps the government from dictating what you read or write, what you hear or say, or how you live? Indeed, what these founders were concluding was that if God Himself does not violate the religious freedom of man, then surely government should not either.

And that’s why this ruling of the Supreme Court this last week was not just good news for Christians. It was good news for everyone. My friend, Russell Moore, wrote, “A government that can pave over the consciences of the owners of Hobby Lobby can steamroll over any dissent anywhere. Whether you agree or disagree with Christians about abortion, every American should want to see a government that is not powerful enough to set itself up as a god over the conscience.”

Indeed, government does not exist for the establishment of religion—any religion, including Christianity. And at the same time, government does not exist for the elimination of religion, which is increasingly the trend in our culture, where we’re setting up a secular state that functionally leaves no room for religion in the public square. The government doesn’t exist to eliminate religion or to establish religion. No, the government exists for the free exercise of religion, and that language is crucial. It’s the language that’s used in our Bill of Rights, but it’s not a language that’s used in contemporary culture.

People talk today about the freedom of worship, which is subtly different. Because when people use that terminology instead of the free exercise of freedom, people are referring primarily to the freedom that men and women have to gather in a church building like this or a synagogue or a mosque or another place for corporate worship. That extends to the home, where families have the freedom to pray or not to pray before meals, before bed, any other time during the day.

But all of this, whether at home or in a religious building, is private—a freedom that one has when he or she is either alone with a physical family or faith family. But what this label, “freedom of worship,” fails to acknowledge is that those who gather for worship in private settings then scatter to live out their beliefs in the public square. In other words, faith by its very nature can’t be private. It’s inevitably public. That’s what Peter’s saying here. Your faith as free servants of God affects the way you live. And as Christians who live and study and work and play in every sector of society, we live out our convictions in every sector of society. That’s what the free exercise of religion means—the freedom of worship not just in episodic gatherings but in everyday life. This is the issue at the core of the Hobby Lobby case, Elane Photography circumstance. When the Supreme Court of New Mexico said (remember?),

The Huguenins are free to think, to say, to believe, as they wish; they may pray to the God of their choice and follow those commandments in their personal lives wherever they lead. The Constitution protects the Huguenins in that respect... [But in] the smaller, more focused world of the marketplace, of commerce, of public accommodation, the Huguenins have to channel their conduct, not their beliefs, so as to leave space for other Americans who believe something different.

They are compelled by law to compromise the very religious beliefs that inspire their lives. And if that seems hard, the court said, "It is the price of citizenship in our country."

Do you see how huge this is? And, thankfully, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that the government can't and mustn't require people of faith to violate their sincerely held beliefs. But this is not an issue that we just sit back passively on. As gospel-saturated people, we work for religious liberty for all—knowing that not everyone will agree with us; knowing we'll have vigorous disagreement with others. But in the context of that disagreement—so in this marketplace of ideas where religious exploration and expression are open—we reason with one another with respect and honor about how to flourish alongside one another, not in spite of our differences but in light of our differences.

But what if the government does require us to violate our sincerely held beliefs? So what if less than a week ago this case had gone 5-4 the other way? What do the owners of Hobby Lobby and Conestoga Wood do? Or what do you and I do if the government mandates that we do something that violates our faith in God and His Word as a school teacher? Or as a lawyer? Or as an accountant? Someone provides this good or that service?

We obey our government unless it requires us to disobey God.

The answer from 1 Peter 2, Romans 13, and Matthew 22 is clear. We obey our government unless it requires us to disobey our God. So we obey our government. We want to obey our government. We are inclined to obey our government, and we honor our government and its leaders. We do not complain about our government, brothers and sisters. It is a good institution given to us by our God, led by men and women created in the image of God, whom we honor and we respect and we do not degrade. Pray for our president, governors, regularly. We obey our government and we honor its leaders. Ultimately, we fear our God and we obey His Word.

Think about it this way. While I was studying 1 Peter 2, I came across four options that James Montgomery Boice, former pastor up in Philadelphia, outlined when it comes to how we approach God and government. It just helped to simplify it for me. He said one option is to say God alone is our authority. Which obviously God is our ultimate authority, but as we've seen in 1 Peter 2, God Himself has set up other authorities in our lives for our good. He's done this in different areas of our lives. God's put children under the good and loving authority of parents and other authority structures in the family and in our society, including government. That's what 1 Peter is teaching. So, yes, God is our ultimate authority, but by God's own design, He is not our only authority. He has set up authority structures in our lives for our good. So this option is not biblical.

The second option would be to say the government alone is our authority, which we obviously know that 1 Peter 2 is not teaching. We are to subject ourselves to the government for the Lord's sake. This is an extremely dangerous option. Its effect is evident in a totalitarian regime like North Korea today. This is not a biblical option.

Third, we might perceive that God and government are both authorities with government in the dominant position. In other words, we want to submit to God and government, but if we have to make a choice, ultimately we're going to submit to the government. And I hope we know, even before looking at 1 Peter and even more so after looking at 1 Peter, this is not a biblical option. But I'm convinced this is the option many Christians are functionally taking in our culture today. We wouldn't say outright that we're prioritizing government over God, but if we are not careful we can begin subtly, and almost unknowingly, to accommodate cultural norms and government mandates out of fear of what might happen to us if we don't. Little things here and there in such a way that, in the end, almost unknowingly, we find ourselves fearing the government more than we fear God. This was a constant temptation for the church in the first century, and I'm convinced it will be a constant temptation for Christians in the 21st century. And we must guard against it.

We must guard our hearts with a fear of God in such a way that, fourth option, we realize that God and government are both authorities with God in the dominant position—which is exactly what 1 Peter describes. Submit to governing rulers for the Lord's sake as you follow the Lord's will. Fear God as those who are free to serve Him however He leads no matter what the cost. This is exactly what Jesus taught. Render to Caesar what is Caesar and to God what is God's. And government may be worthy of your citizenship, but only God is worthy of your soul. So as you're inclined to submit to government in every way you can, you cannot violate the Word of God in your belief and your practice, Christian, which leads then to one conclusion that's all over Scripture: we must obey God rather than men.

These are the exact words the early church when they were being commanded by the government not to preach the gospel. Acts 5:27 says:

"And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name [we commanded you; we're requiring you; don't teach in this name], yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

And this is not the only time this happens in Scripture. We think about other times when the commands of government and the commands of God have directly contradicted one another in the history of God's people, and the people of God have chosen to obey God rather than government. Think Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—an edict from the king, saying, "Bow down and worship the king." And they say no, even when faced with the threat of a fiery furnace. Three chapters later, Daniel 6: "You cannot pray to any other god. Given homage to the king." Daniel doesn't just in private. He opens his windows, and he prays to God, knowing that he would be thrown into a den of lions.

They're not alone. Hebrews 11:35 tells us of...

Men and women who were tortured, refusing to accept release... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

This is the legacy of those who've gone before us—brothers and sisters in Christ who, when faced with a challenge, chose to obey God rather than men. So, God, may the same thing be said of us in our day—that we obeyed our government unless our government was compelling us to disobey our God. May it be said of us that we did not put our hope ultimately in our government and the safety and security we find in it. May it be said of us that we put our hope ultimately in our God and the safety and security we find in Him. May it be said of us that we staked our lives on obedience to Him in anticipation of the day when we will stand before the true Supreme Court of the universe, and we want to be found faithful on that day.

We speak and serve on behalf of the persecuted church around the world.

And then flowing from this, one more application. So even as we think about our lives in this culture where religious liberty is becoming a more rare commodity, we've got to lift our eyes for a moment to brothers and sisters around the world who have nowhere near the religious liberty that we have and come to this fourth application. We must speak and serve on behalf of the persecuted church around the world. We must speak and serve on behalf of the persecuted church around the world.

This letter that we're reading, 1 Peter, was written to Christians who were suffering, some of them facing possible death for their faith in Christ. And we have brothers and sisters who are living in that kind of world right now. According to our State Department, Christians face persecution of some kind in more than 60 different countries right now. On average, about 100 Christians around the world are killed every month for their faith in Christ. And that's a conservative estimate. Some estimates have that much, much higher. So conservatively about a 100 of our brothers and sisters around the world every month are killed for their faith in Christ. Literally, countless others persecuted through abuse, beatings, imprisonment, torture, deprivation of food, water, shelter. I can still see North Korea in my mind, standing at the border of the Korean demilitarized zone and thinking of our brothers and sisters on the other side of that line, living in prison camps where they're slavishly working and will eventually, many if not most of them, be killed for their faith. North Korean police trained travel, where they pose as refugees and infiltrate churches to discover contacts in the North Korean church. They create mock prayer meetings to catch and eventually murder North Korean Christians.

It's not just there. Syrian rebels right now who are targeting Syrian Christians—abusing, raping, murdering, and beheading them. During one month alone in Egypt recently, 38 churches were destroyed; 23 of those were vandalized; 58 homes burned; 85 shops looted; seven Christians kidnapped; and six Christians killed. The following month witnessed the worst attack in Pakistan's history, as suicide bombers exploded shrapnel-laden vests outside All Saints Church in Peshawar, murdering 81 church members and wounding more than 100 others.

We hear stories of persecution in places like Nigeria, even this week. And these are not stories, right? These are friends of ours—friends of mine, like Ian's precious sister in North Africa who knows her family wants to slit her throat because she's a Christian. Jean and Lynn, who have worked within East Asia, risking their lives to lead the church there. I can still see Sahil's faith, as he shares with me this story about how his wife was poisoned to death by her parents for her faith in Christ—Normun and Senida who were stoned in their Tibetan Buddhist village two weeks after they came to faith in Christ.

We must speak and serve on their behalf. We speak. So what do you think we speak? We speak to God on their behalf. We pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters. Do you intentionally pray for the persecuted church at some point during the week? If you could

just answer that in your mind. Do you at some point... Some point in this last week—did you pray for the persecuted church? If not, let me challenge you to change that this week—to make that part of your regular prayer.

Brothers and sisters, go to the Open Doors website, Voice of the Martyrs website. Learn about suffering among our brothers and sisters around the world—how to pray for them. And pray for them specifically. We speak to God on their behalf, and we speak to our government and other governments on their behalf. So we are working for their freedom. That's the implication we're looking at here. So whether it's Pastor Sayid in Iran or Mariam Ibrahim in Sudan or hundreds of others like them, we speak and we serve. We serve.

We give and we go to our persecuted brothers and sisters. We give. This is why we take up an offering every year at Secret Church. This is why we're involved in giving as a church to persecuted brothers and sisters. Just think about the challenges that come when a church building is bombed or when a family loses a father to jail and is no longer able to provide for his wife and his kids. So we give to them.

And we go to them. We give and we go, not one or the other. I remember the first time I ever came face to face with the persecuted church in what is now South Sudan—years ago when Sudan was still in the middle of wartime after 20 years of civil war that had ravaged churches and murdered Christians all over the place. I went into what's now South Sudan, and I remember before I went on that trip a woman came up to me in the church that I was a part of and said, "Why are you spending all this money to go Sudan?" It was an expensive trip, not just going to Africa—it's expensive in and of itself—but then to have to get a private plane to get into this area. And she said, "Why are you spending all that money? Wouldn't it be more valuable for you to just send money? It would go a lot farther than you just being there for a couple of weeks." And it was a sincere question and a good question. I remember wrestling with it.

So I go there and I'm in this community for two weeks. I'm walking among these brothers and sisters, serving them, praying with them, opening the Word with them. And near the end of that time, Andrew comes up to me—one of the brothers here in South Sudan. He comes up to me and says, "David, we're so thankful for all the gifts people have sent and the aid people have sent over these last 20 years, both the church and NGO's and just through different avenues. We're extremely thankful." And he said, "But you want to know how you can tell who a true brother is?" I said, "How?" He said, "A true brother comes to be with you in your deepest time of need." And he just looked at me and said, "Thank you for coming to be with us."

And all of a sudden, any regret I had over spending money to go on this trip faded away real quickly. I walked away from that conversation just thinking, "This is the essence of the gospel, right?" When God brought salvation to you and me, He did not send cash or credit. He sent Himself. And so we give. Yes, we give. And we go. As we have opportunity, we go to our brothers and sisters.

And in the end, we identify with them. This word is so key. We identify with our persecuted brothers and sisters. Here's what I mean by that. We have an enormous amount of freedom compared with many of our brothers and sisters around the world. Right? I mean, I've got freedom to preach this sermon. That's freedom and an enormous amount of freedom. It may be eroding, but it's still enormous.

So let's live like it. In the midst of albeit eroding but still enormous freedom, let's identify with our brothers and sisters who are in persecution in these ways. First, by following Christ

no matter what it costs. No matter what it costs in the culture around us, let's refuse to keep our faith private, church. After all, how is it possible to keep faith in Christ private in the first place? Privatized Christianity is a curse across our culture. It's not possible. Privatized faith in a resurrected King is practically impossible. You can't know this King and be silent about this King.

We're compelled to live out our faith in Him—to apply our convictions from Him in every facet of our lives, knowing it may cost us at work; it may cost us in our community; it may cost us according to the government; but we fear God more than we fear men. We obey Christ regardless of what it costs. What are we saying to our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world when we are faced with small compromise and we shrink back in fear because of what it may cost us? May it not be so. Let's identify with our brothers and sisters; them oftentimes at much greater cost; us oftentimes at much less cost. But let's identify with them by following Christ no matter what it costs.

And let's identify with them by proclaiming the gospel to people around us and people around the world. Proclaiming the gospel. That word, "proclaiming"—proclamation is the reason for persecution. Right? I mean, think about it. We have brothers and sisters around the world in North Korea and in Saudi Arabia, in Syria, in North Sudan. And if they are silent about their faith in those countries, they will not experience any suffering. No, they'll suffer when they speak about their faith in Christ to others. They'll be persecuted when they proclaim the gospel to others. That's when it will cost them, but they're doing it anyway. They're proclaiming the gospel anyway, and 100 at least are dying every month for it.

So let's identify with them by proclaiming the gospel like them. We, by God's grace, live in a land where we do have a certain amount of religious liberty, by which we can proclaim the gospel without fear of imprisonment or death. So far be it from us, with this incredible privilege that our brothers and sisters around the world would give anything to have, far be it from us to squander our liberty in gospel silence in our lives, because we're afraid of what someone might think about us. Or afraid of an awkward turn in a conversation. God, may it not be so. Let's identify with our brothers and sisters this week by proclaiming the gospel to people around us and to people around the world.

I'm thinking here particularly about people in places where religious liberty is not a reality. So I'm thinking of Saudi Arabia and Syria and Somalia, places like that. So many people in places where there is no religious liberty, and, as a result, people in those places have never heard the gospel. There are government regulations and societal pressures set up in these places to keep the gospel from getting to those people. But here's the deal: somebody's got to get it to them. So will you be the somebody? Will I be the somebody? Will you and I go to hard places to proclaim the gospel to them?

You say, "Well, that's a lot of risk." But here's the deal: somebody's got to take the risk. Why should our brothers and sisters around the world be the only one taking risks while we sit back in the confines of comfortable churches enjoying religious liberty? We're free from risk all our lives. Hear this, brother or sister in Christ, the call of Christ may be for you to forsake religious liberty here and embrace suffering and persecution there for the spread of the gospel to people who would not hear it otherwise. Are you open to that?

This is not for super-Christians. This is for every follower of Christ. Our lives belong to Him. We want, we want, we want His gospel to spread to the nations. We want His glory more than we want life itself. This is what brothers and sisters who have sat among us and have left to go out to the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, North Africa on church planting teams. They've taken their families and young kids, and they're going to places where there

is no religious liberty. They're leaving it behind. Why? Because they want to suffer? Because they want to be persecuted? No, because they want the glory of Christ more than they want their own safety and security, and they know that following Christ involves obedience wherever He leads for the sake of His name around the world.

So, God, help us not to sit back all our Christian lives and never give second thought to the fact that God may be calling each of us to join with persecuted brothers and sisters around the world for the spread of the gospel until the day when He returns to receive the praise He's due.

This is what this gospel compels us to do. This, our Savior King, who joyfully... He joyfully went to the cross and endured suffering and scorn and shame of the cross. He did this. He was sentenced to crucifixion so that we might be saved from our sin, free to enjoy God forever. And as free servants of God, our lives are now His to spend—here this week proclaiming this gospel and around the world in the days to come proclaiming this gospel, no matter what it costs, because we know that Christ is our reward.

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