



## **FAITH & FREEDOM**

If you have a Bible—let me invite you to open with me to 1 Peter 2. As we enter into July 4th week here in the United States, and particularly in our nation’s capital, we obviously think about and celebrate the freedoms we have, including the freedom to worship we’re experiencing right now. So I thought it would be helpful to pause in our Biblical Traits in the Church series—we have two traits left out of 12—and consider how God biblically calls us to live in a government like ours. Specifically, we’ll think about how faith in Christ fundamentally transforms how we view and use our freedom.

I think this is critical, because if we’re not careful, we can suddenly and almost unknowingly think about the government the way the world thinks about it, instead of the way God’s Word thinks about government. In a similar way, we can have more of an American idea of freedom than a biblical idea of freedom. We want God’s Word to drive the way we think about everything, including July 4th week, particularly here in D.C. and especially in light of current events in our country.

Think about the headlines right now: migrant children being separated from their families at our borders, the Supreme Court upholding an executive order from the President restricting immigrants from certain predominantly Muslim countries, a Supreme Court justice announcing his retirement from the bench this week—bringing a debate about abortion, marriage, sexuality, affirmative action and numerous other issues back to the table of our nation’s dialogue in a fresh way.

I know there are people all across this church who have all kinds of different thoughts on these issues. I kind of tense up, because some—maybe even most of these issues—are highly charged for many of us, not just politically, but emotionally. Some of these things are extremely upsetting, emotionally heart-breaking and even exasperating. As I’ve said before and will continue to say, my aim is never to offer my political opinions. That is not why you came here today. You came here because you want to hear the Word of God.

I want to shepherd you well with God’s Word—not with political opinions, but with biblical truth. I want to show you foundations in God’s Word that shape, not just the way we think, but the way we live, as many of us are citizens in this country. So what I want to do is walk through a passage in 1 Peter 2. Then, with the help of a few other texts in the Bible, I want to show you two primary truths in Scripture on God, government, faith and freedom.

Along the way, I want to make application to our lives, particularly in light of this week and all that's going on in our country, then I want to close with two primary truths that will lead to two takeaways at the very end of our time together. So let's start by reading 1 Peter 2:13-17. This is the Word of God:

*<sup>13</sup> Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, <sup>14</sup> or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. <sup>15</sup> For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. <sup>16</sup> Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. <sup>17</sup> Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

The reason I'm taking us to this passage in particular is because of the context in which Peter is writing this letter. He's writing to a group of Christians who are experiencing persecution in first century Rome. They were wondering, "How do we relate to the Roman government around us?" It was a Christless government and they were asking, "How do we respond to this? Should we ignore government or disregard it altogether? Should we resist government in this way or that way? Or should we just be quiet and do whatever government says?"

We've got to remember the biblical context here and need to keep in mind that the New Testament context is very different from the Old Testament context. In the Old Testament, God's people originated as a theocracy, with God as King. Then they became a monarchy. But when we get to the New Testament, God didn't organize His people in a government. Instead, Christians were spread out in society. First Peter 1:1 calls Christians exiles who are scattered amidst worldly governments for the glory of God. That then leads to the first truth we see here in 1 Peter 2:13-17.

## **Truth #1 – We are submissive citizens of a government.**

From the very start of this passage, the Bible is clear that, as followers of Christ, we are to subject ourselves to human institutions and the authority they have in our lives. Peter says this applies particularly to emperors and governors who are over us. This is God's will, this passage says, and the key word is "submissive." We're to submit—to subject ourselves willingly—to the government around us which is a pretty astonishing command when you think about it.

Peter is wrote this letter to Christians, either during the time of the emperor Claudius, or more likely Nero, both of whom were totally ungodly, even setting themselves up as gods. Nero was persecuting and killing Christians, and Peter says, "Be subject to the emperor as supreme and to governors sent by him. Do this for the Lord's sake. This is the will of God." That was pretty astonishing to read in the first century!

We need to realize that Peter is only echoing what Jesus Himself taught in Matthew 22, when He 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 which was especially despised by the Jewish people. Jesus gave His response in Matthew 22:21.

After asking for a sample of a coin with Caesar's likeness on it, Jesus said, "*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*"

Jesus clearly didn't teach that His followers should disregard government. Instead Jesus teaches that there are things we rightfully owe government. Paying taxes was not just permissible. It was morally obligatory to pay taxes, even to a pagan king. So we are obeying even God on April 15th each year. Just remember that—it's an act of worship to God. We are submissive citizens of a government who render to that government what it is due according to the will of God.

Peter is not just echoing Jesus. He's also pointing us to Romans 13, a text that has received some air time in the news recently, based on some statements from the Attorney General about it. I want to be clear: my aim is not to comment on what the Attorney General meant by his words, but I do want to clarify what God meant when He said these words.

Listen to what God says in Romans 13:1-7. This is the Word of God:

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*

That sounds pretty similar to Matthew 22 and 1 Peter 2, doesn't it? Paul opens with almost the same statement Peter used. He says, "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,*" because God has set them up as authority for a purpose. That purpose is evident in both Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. The summary is twofold, according to God's Word. Why does government exist?

1. Government is given by God to restrain evil. Emperors and government, Peter says, are sent by God to punish those who do evil. Romans 13:4 says the government is a servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

2. Government is given by God to promote good. First Peter 2:14 says the government's purpose is "*to praise those who do good.*" In the same way, Romans 13 talks about how government is given by God to promote good for people.

Obviously, one of the ways government promotes good under God is by protecting freedoms given to people by God. So let's pause and make some application here. This is why we as Christians view issues like religious freedom, not primarily as political issues but as biblical issues. This week, we know and

celebrate the Declaration of Independence, which says, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among those are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness...” It goes on to say, “That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men.” But the founders of our nation did not come up with that. The Author of creation came up with that.

We see from the very beginning of the Bible that religious freedom is not ultimately given by government—it’s ultimately given by God Himself. In Genesis 1-3, we see that God creates man and woman with the capacity to choose whether or not to obey or disobey Him. God doesn’t force faith upon His creation.

We often talk about God’s sovereignty over all things, which He is. But His sovereignty does not remove or negate man and woman’s responsibility. We all have the choice whether or not to obey God. We have that choice because God has given it to us. This is clear in the ministry of Jesus. He came to the earth inviting people to receive Him or reject Him. Many people 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, Jesus rebuked His disciples for their desire to call down condemnation on Samaritans who were rejecting Him. Then in the next chapter, Luke 10, Jesus encouraged His disciples to respect people’s freedom to reject Him. This is part of why we see what we see in 1 Peter. Honor everyone, the Bible says here in verse 17, even the emperor—and those who are different from you. Why? Because as men and women made in the image of God, we have the capacity to choose either to obey or to disobey God.

This is why it’s not good for you or me or any government to force faith upon people. That’s not just because of the Declaration of Independence; that’s because of the declaration of God. We don’t force faith upon people, because God Himself doesn’t force faith upon people. If you think about it, faith in its very essence can’t be forced. In order for faith to be faith, it can’t be forced. Faith in and of itself is a willful decision in the human heart to believe or not believe in someone or something. Augustine, an early church father, rightly wrote, “When force is applied, the will is not aroused. One can enter the church unwillingly. One can approach the altar unwillingly. One can receive the sacrament unwillingly. No one can believe except willingly.” Each person has to choose to believe.

So, based on the Bible, we believe that government does not exist for the establishment of religion—any religion, including Christianity. At the same time, government does not exist for the elimination of religion. Government does not exist to eliminate nor establish religion. Government exists for the free exercise of religion. It exists to promote that right and to protect that right. This is why we grieve—not based primarily on political grounds, but on biblical grounds—whenever we see governments around the world that restrict or violate religious freedom, whether it’s a totalitarian regime like North Korea, or a variety of nations around the world where it’s illegal to convert to a certain faith.

This is why, church, whenever we see news headlines about North Korea, or any of a number of other nations who act along these lines, our first impulse should be to pray and work for religious freedom. Specifically, we should pray and work for the persecuted church around the world. Let's remember this week that the freedoms we celebrate here are not shared by many of our brothers and sisters around the world. Many of them are living right now in a setting very similar to that addressed in 1 Peter, where it's costing them deeply to follow Christ.

According to our State Department, Christians face persecution of some kind in more than 60 different countries. On average, about a hundred Christians around the world are killed every month for their faith in Christ. Some estimates have that number much higher—I chose the most conservative one I could find. Literally countless others are persecuted through abuse, beatings, imprisonment, torture, deprivation of food, water, shelter, jobs. The Bible commands us to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world—all the more so on a week like this. We miss the point of this week if we bask in our freedom while turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to family—our brothers and sisters around the world—who long for this kind of freedom.

Now, that obviously leads us to ask if the Bible teaches that we're submissive citizens of a government, then what do you do when that government isn't doing what God created it to do? How do you live as a submissive citizen of a government when that government is not restraining evil and is not promoting good? How do you live when you see a government doing the opposite by promoting evil and restraining good? That's a question our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world wrestle with, and that's a question, in varying degrees, that we find ourselves wrestling with even here.

But again, that's what so astonishing in these passages. Paul and Peter are writing these letters amidst an openly decadent Roman Empire, filled with idolatry, immorality of all kinds, the abuse of women, infanticide with children, and the persecution of Christians. Paul and Peter were both killed because of their faith in Christ, yet both of them are saying that Christians are submissive citizens of a government.

So how do we live like that? That question leads to the second truth in the Bible concerning God and government, faith and freedom.

## **Truth #2 – We are free servants of God.**

Not only are we submissive citizens of a government, but we are also free servants of God. Look at 1 Peter 2:16: *“Live as people who are free...”* This is not Peter giving a political stump speech. He's not talking about political freedom. Peter is talking about spiritual freedom. He's talking about how Christians have been freed from the power and penalty of sin, and that freedom makes us *“...servants of God.”*

Now, “free servant” may seem like an oxymoron, like jumbo shrimp. But it's not. Free servant? How is that possible? Here's how: Because of the death of Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the

dead, all those who place their faith in Him are free from the bondage of sin to live the life God has created us to live as servants of Him.

For non-Christian friends who are here today, please do not mistake what is primary in our gathering here right now. We are incredibly thankful for the political freedom we enjoy in this country. But there is a much, much greater freedom that we are celebrating in this gathering, freedom that does not come from a government. This freedom comes from our God. So especially if you're not a follower of Christ, we're all born slaves to sin. Each of us are prone to turn from God to our own ways. As a result, each of us are destined for eternity apart from God in our slavery to sin.

But the good news of the Bible is that God loves us. God has not left us alone in our slavery to sin and eternal death. He has come to us in the person of Jesus, Who never once sinned. And then, even though He did not deserve to die, He chose to die for our sins in order to pay the price we are due. Then He rose from the grave in victory over sin and death, so that everyone, anyone, who repents and believes, who turns from sin and trusts in the love of Jesus will be forgiven of all your sin and freed from its penalty and power forever. That is the freedom that unites us in this gathering right now.

If you think about it, there are people right now who are not citizens of the United States but who are part of this gathering. If that's you, we don't want you for a second to feel left out of this service, because you are not on the outside of this celebration. We have not gathered today, even during the July 4th week, to celebrate our U.S. citizenship. That's not what the church does, because that's not who the church is. The church doesn't unite around an earthly citizenship; the church unites around a heavenly citizenship. The church is not made up of people who unite together under a particular country's flag; the church is made up of people who unite together under a particular cross—the cross of Jesus Christ. We have more in common with a Syrian Christian sitting next to us than an American atheist—far more in common, forever.

This is why, when we gather as a church, we put aside national and even political differences. We worship under the banner, not of a country, but under the banner of a King. That King's name is definitely not Donald Trump. It wasn't Barack Obama. It wasn't George Bush or Bill Clinton. And for that matter, it was never George Washington either. Our King's name is, always has been, and always will be Jesus Christ.

As thankful as we are for the freedom that our government gives us, the purpose of our gathering today and every Sunday all year long is to celebrate the freedom God has given us in Him, because that's a freedom we enjoy no matter where we live, no matter where our passport is from. It's a freedom that transcends nations and governments. It's a freedom that we will celebrate with people from every nation for all of eternity. We are free servants of God. That's what makes us the church.

Now, with that freedom—our freedom in Christ, which is ultimate freedom—comes much responsibility for the Christian in his or her country, including the United States. So follow this: Peter says we use our freedom in Christ in two main ways.

1. We use our freedom in Christ to model good lives. Look at verses 13 and 15: “*Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution... For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.*” Then he continues in verse 16: “*Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.*” Here’s the picture: As the result of what God has done in our lives through Jesus, we’re now free servants of His, which means we’re free to live, not as evil, but as good—doing good.

When Peter talks about silencing the ignorance of foolish people, he’s talking about slanderous attacks against Christians by non-Christians in the culture around them. Peter is zealous, in a Matthew 5:13-16 kind of way, for Christians to be salt and light in the culture and country around them, so that non-Christians may see their good deeds and glorify God in heaven. So we use our freedom in Christ, not in an evil or selfish way, but in a good, humble, selfless way, modeling the goodness of Christ, in submission to the governing authorities over us. We use our freedom in Christ to model lives. That should be the commentary on our lives in our country. We’re showing the goodness of God.

2. We use our freedom in Christ to show God’s love. If we look at 1 Peter 2:17, we see that he closes this passage with four short commands: “*Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*” So how does God’s Word tell us specifically to show His love in the country around us? First, we honor everyone—especially our leaders. Notice, this command to honor starts and ends this verse, like bookends. So the picture is followers of Christ showing respect, attributing dignity and assigning value to everyone without exception—even people who disagree with or oppose us. We are to honor them. They are made in God’s image and are therefore worthy of respect.

This is why we must be known for honoring. The Word of God is why we honor babies in the womb. The Word of God is why we honor people of different ethnicities. The Word of God is why we honor the poor and oppressed. The Word of God is why we honor immigrants who have made their home in our country. The Word of God is why we honor children and their parents at our borders. And on and on. Again, I’m not advocating a particular policy or position here. There is room for so much discussion among followers of Christ on these issues. But what is driving all of us in those discussions is that we are concerned with showing God’s love by honoring all people.

Did you catch how Peter closes this section? He included honoring the emperor! It’s like Peter is saying, “Especially him. Honor even this man who set himself as a god over you and leads a government that is persecuting you, for even he is a man made in the image of God and worthy of your honor.” What a word that we need to hear. The Bible, God in His Word, beckons us to honor our President and our government leaders, in the way we speak about them, in the way we pray for them. Obviously, we should realize that some Presidents and some leaders are easier to honor for some people than for others, if we’re honest.

Some people who held Barack Obama in high honor are having a hard time showing honor for Donald Trump. Others of us have much honor for Donald Trump, but had a hard time showing honor for Barack Obama. Some of us have had a hard time honoring either of them. But brothers and sisters, the Bible doesn't give us a choice here. This is a command. And if Nero was worthy of honor in the first century, then our President and our leaders are worthy of honor in the 21st century.

Obviously that doesn't mean we agree with everything a President or a government leader does, or that we support everything in his or her agenda. But it does mean we recognize that this is a person created in the image of God, that God loves them, that God desires them to know Him, that they will one day stand before God as judged. So we intercede for them regularly and we speak about them decently. We honor everyone, especially our leaders. It's how we show God's love.

Second, we care for the church. The second command there in verse 17 is, "*Love the brotherhood.*" It's a reference to the church. We see a priority here much like we see all over the New Testament, not just on showing the love of Christ in the world, but particularly showing the love of Christ to one another in the church. The church is in the world together and the church needs each other.

"Brotherhood" is a picture of a family. I know all of you weren't here on Wednesday night for our congregational meeting, but if you were here, I trust you were deeply encouraged by a particular story. There were a variety of things that night that were particularly encouraging. There's a member of our church who had been in a Christian-Muslim relations class, learning how to share God's love with Muslims, how to share the gospel with Muslims. A couple months ago he was out walking his dog and met a Muslim from Syria in his neighborhood. He started talking with this man and ended up sharing the gospel with him. Long story short, he continued to share the gospel over the next couple of months. Then Wednesday night, as we welcomed new members into the church, this man from Syria was welcomed as a member into McLean Bible Church—because he has now put his faith in Christ! Praise God for that.

I'm intentionally not using his name, because he's experiencing real challenges right now in his family. It was a really powerful picture to say to this brother, in a room full of people, "You have brothers and sisters all across this room who want to be family to you. We have a unity in Christ that transcends political, national or any other boundary. We are together in Christ and you're like a brother to us." This is the picture: we love and care for the church in the midst of the culture around us.

That leads to this last command here, "*Fear God.*" This is the key to everything. Everything we've considered must be seen under the umbrella of fear before God. The Bible is clear. We don't fear the emperor. We don't fear governors. We don't fear men. We fear God alone. This is huge, because at the close of this passage we realize that even submission to the government, as important as that is, must ultimately be done in the context of fearing God.

So follow this: Peter is making it absolutely clear that governing authorities, including the emperor, do not hold absolute sway over our lives. Only God possesses that kind of authority. Let me say that again:



Governing authorities, including the emperor or president or whoever, do not hold absolute sway over our lives. Only God possesses that kind of authority in our lives. Peter is clearly not advocating submission to government regardless of what the government says, because believers in Christ are first and foremost, over and above everything, free servants of God.

Just think about the language of this passage. We're to be subject to governing authorities—verse 13 says—“for the Lord’s sake.” We're to obey the will of God, verse 15 says. So if a government is prescribing something evil, then the Christian is not obligated to do evil. Why not? Because the Christian ultimately fears God. Peter is certainly not advocating committing sin for the Lord’s sake. He’s not saying, “Sin, because it’s the will of God.”

Similarly, if the government sits back and allows evil, then the Christian is obligated to do good because we fear God. In the words of Micah 6:8, we do justice. We love mercy. We work on behalf of the poor and the weak and the oppressed. This is one of the lessons we must learn as the church. From slavery and Jim Crow laws in our country in the past, we know that it was not right for Christians to be passive about slavery or Jim Crow. The Bible was beckoning them to work for the good of African-Americans. Today we are beckoned, we are required, in the words of Micah 6, to work for good, to love justice, to love mercy—particularly in a representative democracy, where we all have a part to play in how our government works. We must use our freedom in Christ to show the love of Christ.

If you start to put all this together, we are submissive citizens of a government, inclined to submit to governing authorities, and we want to submit to them because God has set them up for our good. As Christians, we are also free servants of God, freed from sin to model good lives and to show God’s love in the world. So what do we do in circumstances where the will of God and the will of government are in opposition to one another, when the government is commanding or requiring or prescribing believers to sin, or where the government is not protecting and promoting the good of people? God is telling us that as followers of Christ we are to honor our government and its leaders, but ultimately we obey our God, because we fear our God more than we fear government.

So let’s apply this practically. In Lon’s words, “So what?” I trust that we all know that standing on the Bible, sharing the gospel in our country today is increasingly viewed as narrow-minded, offensive, even dangerous. Many companies and corporations are establishing policies for employees that virtually require you to violate your conscience in Christ. Increasing numbers of professions are requiring licenses that actually counter Christian convictions. So what do you do? What do I do? What does the church do? What do we do in all of our different jobs, when government mandates that we do something that violates our faith in God and His Word—as a school teacher, as a lawyer, as an accountant, as a provider of this product or that service?

The answer from 1 Peter 2, Romans 13 and Matthew 22 is clear: we honor government and its leaders, but ultimately we fear our God and His Word. We model good lives and show God’s love in

obedience to His Word, no matter what that means for us. I think about John Perkins, a gospel-believing civil rights leader—a church leader for decades. Dr. Perkins is now 88 years old. During the civil rights movement he participated in marches, resisted laws that forbade African-Americans from sitting or eating in certain places. Dr. Perkins advocated peaceful civil disobedience.

He was actually his way to personally post bail for some demonstrators one night in Mississippi when he was ambushed by more than a dozen white deputy sheriffs. They beat Perkins within an inch of his life, along with a couple of others. They tortured and dehumanized him. They stuck forks up his nose, down his throat, punched and kicked him, until they thought he was going to die, then threw him into jail. So why, after that, did he continue to participate in acts of peaceful civil disobedience?

In one of his many books, Perkins writes about Romans 13, saying:

Romans 13:1-5 makes clear that every Christian must submit himself to the governing authorities, for “there is no authority except that which God has established.” Scriptures teach us to make every effort to live at peace with everyone, to return good for evil, to turn the other cheek, and as a rule, to follow laws laid down by government authorities. Even though many emperors were despotic and evil rulers, in Titus 3 and 1 Peter 2, the apostles Paul and Peter still instructed Christians to submit to the Roman government.

Perkins acknowledges exactly what we’ve talked about. Then immediately after writing this, he explains:

If your conscience recognizes that a law is evil, it is your responsibility to use the free will you’ve been given to rise up against it. A part of the Christian’s faith is to free one’s conscience. And if our conscience condemns us, we’re in bad shape, because God is greater than our conscience.

Basically what he’s pointing to there is exactly what 1 Peter 2:17 is encouraging us to do: fear God, because He is our ultimate authority. He has given government as good authority in our lives, yet if we ever have to make a choice between obeying God and obeying government, we obey God. Which is not an easy thing to do. We like to think it is, but the reality is, just like Christians in the first century, this is why we see these exhortations all over the New Testament, because Christians were in businesses where they were missing out because of their faith in Christ. They weren’t able to rise or advance.

So throughout the New Testament, we see encouragement to stay strong, trust in Christ, don’t compromise. The reality is, it’s not just first century. In the 21st century we can so quickly accommodate cultural norms or mandates out of fear of what might happen to us if we don’t. And in the end, we can suddenly find ourselves fearing our government more than we fear our God. It was a constant temptation for the church in the first century and we would be fooling ourselves if we didn’t think it was a temptation for the church in the 21st century.

The Word of God is clear. While we want to submit to government in every way we can, we must submit to God in every way He commands. It’s what Jesus, Peter and Paul are saying. It’s the exact words

of the earliest Christians, when they were being commanded by the government not to preach the gospel. Remember Acts 5:27-28? *“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, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.’”* So how did Peter and the apostles reply? They said, *“We must obey God rather than men.”*

This is not the only time that happened in Scripture. Think about other times when the commands of government and the commands of God have directly contradicted one another, and the people of God chose to obey God rather than government. Think of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in Daniel 3, refusing to bow down and worship the king—even when their lives were threatened with a fiery furnace (Daniel 3).

Or Daniel, just three chapters later, who was commanded not to pray. So what did he do? He went up, opened the doors of his room and prayed—not in private, but in public—knowing that a den of lions would soon be his fate. Hebrews 11:35-38 recounts men and women who...

*...were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 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 have gone before us; brothers and sisters in Christ, who, when faced with challenge, chose to obey God rather than men. I fear that if we're not careful as a church in our culture, we will be tempted to compromise and obey men rather than God. And I want to exhort us to be a church who loves in a godly way, being submissive citizens to the government, and who ultimately loves being free servants who fear God over and above all.

To bring this to a close today, based on these two biblical truths and their practical applications—which we could dive into a lot more—I just want to offer two final takeaways from this text, particularly for us as a church.

## **1. Let us honor those who give their lives defending freedom in our nation.**

That is a good and right thing to do and is one of the ways we show God's love. I trust we know that the privilege we enjoy today—this freedom to worship in this gathering—comes at a high cost. There are men and women who have gone before us and have fought to defend this freedom and their families. There are even those among us who pay a high price on a day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year basis to defend this freedom in our nation, particularly through serving in the military, which many people in this church have done or are doing.

It is right for us to recognize and honor men and women in different ways, to pray for them, to show God's love to them. So before I get to our last takeaway, I want to pause and show you a video that

encapsulates the unique challenge faced by those who serve in the military and the power of the gospel in the midst of that challenge.

### **Video Clip:**

**Iris:** He deployed about a week and a half to two weeks after we got married. He left for Iraq on almost an eight-month deployment.

**Mark:** I served in the United States Marine Corps. A lot of the deployment and things that happened over there, along with my past that had never been dealt with—some pretty dark secrets that were starting to come up. Coming back from Iraq, life was moving on pretty quick and I continued doing what I knew best—that was to just numb myself with drinking.

**Iris:** I started to notice a really big change in him. He was so disconnected, so quick to anger, so impatient.

**Mark:** I was just feeling hopeless, rage and anger all at the same time. I went out to the bridge when these past hurts and this past disgust came out that day. I handed my phone to a security guard and told him to tell my wife that I loved her. I leaped off this bridge, attempting suicide.

**Iris:** My life changed at that point. I loved him, but I didn't feel like I was in love with him anymore.

**Mark:** Four days later I woke from a coma. Around this time I was also introduced to pain killers. I started abusing. I fell into one of my darkest addictions, and I started using crystal meth.

**Iris:** I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help Mark. I'm so angry with him because of his continuous choices.

**Mark:** So I heard about this program called Mighty Oaks. This had to work for me. This was either the make it or break it point in my life. Mighty Oaks taught me that no man fights alone; that I have a purpose beyond just being angry.

**Iris:** For once I could see the clarity in his eyes. I saw hope in him again, which gave me hope. I was invited to the women's club at Mighty Oaks. That's when I made a decision to choose to love Mark. I looked at my kids and thought, "They're so worth it. Mark is worth it. I'm worth it. Our marriage is worth it. We didn't get married by accident."

**Mark:** We both know our roles. I know what God said was my role as a husband, her role as a wife.

**Iris:** We're not perfect. We're still learning. We're still growing as a couple. We're rebuilding.

**Mark:** There's that triangle in our marriage, that if we're both aligning ourselves— inching toward Christ—things will run according to His will.

**Iris:** The tool that I learned from Mighty Oaks was that there's no need for you to fight alone.

**Mark:** I just realized how important it is to have these brothers walk alongside me in life and keep me on the right path. I have a brotherhood again.

**Iris:** I'm so grateful for Mighty Oaks, because if it wouldn't be for them, military families like ourselves would truly end up divorced. Some of our men may even lose their lives. We have an understanding now for each other and I have so much more compassion and love for him than I did before.

**Mark:** God has a plan and it can be fulfilled as long as I stick to His blueprint. I learned a new purpose. I found my identity in Christ.

So church family, I want to introduce you to Mark and Iris, whom you just saw on the video, as well as Gabriel and Tina. Mighty Oaks is a ministry that we partner together with that focuses specifically on bringing hope, love and the peace of Christ into the midst of post-traumatic stress that military families experience. Knowing that we would be doing all we're doing today, we wanted to invite these two couples out to Washington to spend a weekend here—alone and away from everything else, together, to bless them with a week in Washington on behalf of our family.

We want you four to be able to see in us a church that is thankful in ways we can't even begin to express for how you have served our country. And not just you, brothers, but your families and the effects of that. We want you to know we're grateful.

We are also grateful to God for the power of the gospel in your lives. We want you to know we are not just thankful for you, but with you. We love you guys. Thank you for being here this week with us.

Let's pray.

God, we pray specifically for Mark, Iris, Gabriel and Tina. We thank You for Your grace to them. I won't presume to know or imagine the variety of challenges and the valleys they've walked through. God, we praise You today for Your grace in them in the middle of those challenges and valleys. We praise You for the hope of the gospel that has met them at their lows and brought about restoration, redemption, peace, hope and joy. God, we just praise You for the fruit of the gospel in their lives.

We pray for many others like them whom we honor and thank You for this week; people we know who are walking through all kinds of challenges. We pray that the power of the gospel would meet them and restore lives. I think about somebody I talked with in the lobby after the first service who lost a family member from suicide because of PTSD. God, we pray for Your mercy, Your grace and Your blessing on Mighty Oaks and its ministry, and on these brothers and sisters as they minister to others out of the overflow of Your grace to them. We pray that the gospel would spread through this ministry in ways just like what these brothers and sisters represent here. Thank You for Your grace in and through them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## **2. Let us give our lives spreading ultimate freedom among all nations.**

These lives, I trust, are a reminder to us that freedom in our nation—or any nation, for that matter—is not the ultimate goal for which we are living. First, let us honor those who give their lives defending religious freedom in our nation. Then secondly, let us give our lives spreading ultimate freedom among all nations. As the church, we have a clear mission to proclaim the gospel to hurting hearts right here in our country and all over the world. We want people all across Washington, D.C., from all kinds of nations and ethnic backgrounds, to come to know the ultimate freedom that's found in Christ alone.

We don't want to stop here. That's why we have teams right now in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Southeast Asia, in a country where there is no religious freedom, where it's illegal to share the gospel and illegal to convert to Christ. But we're going there and spreading the gospel, because more than anything else, we want people to know freedom from sin and death through new life in Christ.

So this July 4th week, I challenge us as a church, particularly here in the United States, to celebrate the freedom we have. Thank God for it. Honor those who make it possible. But let us not be so American in our thinking that we miss the opportunities around the office or around the cook-out or wherever you might be to share the ultimate freedom that is found in Christ alone.

This the Word of God on God, government, faith and freedom. Let's pray.

O God, we have so much to pray for in light of all we've just seen in Your Word. We praise You for Your grace to us and the freedom we enjoy. We pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters right now who don't have this freedom. Please strengthen and uphold them. Grant them endurance and perseverance in their faith, we pray. Cause them to speak with great boldness so that the gospel might spread through them, even in the middle of persecution.

God, we pray—as You've commanded us to pray—for our leaders. We pray for President Trump. We pray for Vice President Pence. We pray for all of our leader in Congress, judges at state and national levels. God, we pray for Your mercy and Your grace, that You would help them to restrain evil and promote good. We pray that You would draw, by Your grace, their hearts to Your truth and Your definition of that which is good. God, we pray for our lives—we want to be faithful, fearing You in the time and place You've put us.

So help us, as submissive citizens of a government and free servants of Christ, to fear You, to show Your love, to model good lives in a way that brings great glory to Your name. Help us, we pray, to use our freedom in Christ—on top of the other freedoms You give us—to magnify Your name and to spread Your love. May it be so, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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