

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Honor Everyone

1 Peter 2:11-17

"We ought to obey God rather than men." That was the statement on a church sign I passed one day this week. It's more than just a statement. It's actually Scripture. Some of you may recognize it as a quotation from Acts 5:29. In this verse, Peter is speaking not only for himself, but on behalf of the other apostles, in response to an order from the governing authorities, in this case the Sanhedrin. The apostles have been told to stop preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus. But after enduring further deliberation and a beating, they simply go back out into the streets and pick up where they left off, announcing the good news to their world.

Now I'm certain that the congregation that posted Peter's words on its sign hasn't been told by local, state, or federal authorities to cease spreading the gospel. Rather, I'm guessing that "We ought to obey God rather than men" was primarily a response to last week's Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage in all 50 states. There were lots of Christians who had strong feelings, strong reactions, and in some cases, strong words, about the court's ruling. If they couldn't post their words on a church sign, they posted them on a t-shirt, a blog, or a piece of poster board. Then there were the folks who did things the old-fashioned way, and actually talked face-to-face with a live human being, articulating their frustrations and fears.

In first century Asia Minor, the recipients of the letter we call 1 Peter had no church building, and thus no church sign to post their opinions about the policies of the governing authorities. Say "First Amendment" to someone in one of these house churches, and you would have gotten a really puzzled look and maybe a question about what planet you're from. To the believers addressed in this morning's Scripture passage, terminology that's familiar to us, like "separation of church and state," would have been a totally foreign concept.

They had no doubts, however, that there should be some degree of separation between the patterns of living they shared within their Christian communities and the patterns of living that characterized the larger society. After all, they were people who belonged to God, the God who had originally called and created Israel, and through Israel had sent a Savior to reveal and accomplish his purposes for the whole world. Now there were these communities made up of both Jews and Gentiles who had placed their faith in Jesus. So it was crucial that they not lose sight of their identity as a holy community, a distinctive people in the midst of a world that was indifferent to, and even hostile toward, God's purposes.

No wonder that in the verses immediately preceding this morning's text, these believers are told, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (vv. 9-10). That's a mighty heavy job

description, in any century. Whether as a fellowship meeting in the privacy of a home in ancient Asia Minor, or as an assembly with its own outdoor sign along a major highway in contemporary America, the church has always been in the business of bearing faithful witness, usually in a predominantly non-Christian environment.

The crucial question is, How do we do that? How do we stand apart from the majority of society, in our theology and in the values that flow from it, while at the same time being engaged with and participating in the larger culture? How do we articulate and embody the gospel in an environment where most people don't share the same standards of behavior and commitment that are essential in our life together as the church? How do we live out the holiness to which we believe God has called us in an atmosphere where holiness, at least the way we understand it, doesn't seem to be a pressing concern?

A good place to begin is by being as realistic as possible about the cultural context in which we live. There was a time when Christianity had a central and in many ways privileged place in our country's cultural and political discourse. Things like the gospel, the Bible, and the church were more deeply woven into the everyday lives of both individuals and institutions. There was a stronger sense of cohesion between the Christian faith and the larger culture. Christianity was the dominant religion, operated from a position of greater power, and exerted a major influence on society as a whole.

But things are very different now. Our society has become much more secular. Even though many people still identify themselves as Christians, the fact is that church attendance and participation in the community of Jesus' followers has shrunk dramatically, and continues to decrease. The church no longer has such a powerful and privileged voice in shaping the views and policies of the state. Rather than being on the inside of cultural life, the Christian faith now exists more on the outside, leaving it with much less influence. In short, the reality we're still coming to grips with is that Christianity now exists not at the center of our society but on the margins.

Now a member of one of the congregations in Asia Minor might ask, "So why is that such a shock to you? Isn't that just part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, who himself was pushed to the margins, all the way to the point of death on a cross? Why are you twenty-first century disciples in America surprised to find yourselves on the outside of power and privilege? We ourselves, your brothers and sisters in Christ here in the first century, know plenty about marginalization."

Maybe these spiritual ancestors addressed in today's text could also teach us something about where we go from here. Perhaps they could teach us that what looks like a dark day for the Christian faith is actually an opportunity for us to carry the light of the gospel into the world in new ways. Perhaps they could teach us that now is the time to rediscover and relearn the way of Jesus, rather than trying to reshape the world by holding on to privilege or by grabbing the reins of power. Perhaps they could teach us how to not simply survive at the margins, but to actually thrive, by pointing to the coming world that God has promised in Christ, and by embodying that world through alternative values and alternative ways of being in relationship to one another as God's people. In other words, to influence and shape our larger culture, and the people right around us, by actually being the church, God's people bearing witness through lives of holiness.

But let's be careful here. Being a different kind of people, following a different way of life, doesn't mean complete retreat into the space behind the walls of our churches. The recipients of 1 Peter didn't think so. In today's text, there's concern for how Christians should interact with people outside their own households and outside the community of

faith, particularly the political authorities. In the section immediately after this morning's reading, the issue is how Christians should relate to non-Christians in their own household. Right after that comes an extended discussion of how doing good in this world may actually lead to suffering. Clearly, these early believers haven't disengaged from their social and cultural environment.

So while we recognize that we, like the recipients of 1 Peter, really are spiritual immigrants, temporary residents in this present world, the world where we have our permanent citizenship, the reign of God, has already come among us through Jesus and will one day be fully revealed when he comes again to judge and to save. This means that we're not people who are just "passing through" this present world. We're actually people called to exhibit God's redeeming purposes for this present world. We're people who have experienced the loving forgiveness of God and his power to make things new. We're created to be a present sign of a future reality, and to bring that reality to bear on the society and culture in which we live.

As I mentioned, one of the keys will be how we do that. One thing is for sure. We can't do that by taking a combative, holier than thou posture toward the larger society in which we live. Yes, we need to have convictions. Yes, we need to have commitments that define us as people who confess that Jesus is Lord. But we also need to communicate those convictions and apply those commitments in ways that demonstrate that we're aware of our own sinfulness and our own deep need for God's mercy. In other words, engaging our present culture with the gospel will require humility and civility.

Church historian Martin Marty is known for pointing out that "a lot of people today who have strong convictions are not very civil, and a lot of people who are civil don't have very strong convictions, and what we really need is convicted civility."¹ I like that phrase, "convicted civility." It captures the importance of acknowledging our differences, while communicating about those differences in ways that are respectful toward others. Rather than engaging in name-calling, blanket statements, or gross distortions, we're called to give voice to our faith with words that demonstrate respect for others and their opinions.

In the chapter right after today's Scripture reading, there's a verse that we're fond of quoting. It says, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet. 3:15). To state it another way, you need to be ready, at all times, to make the case for the gospel, to defend what you believe as you engage with others, especially those who disagree with you. But we often focus so much on making sure that we're ready to articulate our convictions, that we lose sight of the rest of that verse, which says, "But do this with gentleness and respect." The word translated as "respect" can also mean "reverence."

If you were asked to describe a lot of the religious, political, and cultural debate that takes place these days, "gentleness" and "respect/reverence" probably aren't the first terms that come to mind. Our discussions, and the people participating in them, often seem so polarized and combative. That's partly because there are such deep and genuine disagreements about really difficult and complex issues. And yet, the Scriptures tell you and me to approach these disagreements with a particular way of seeing both self and the person on the other side of the debate. As for self, you're a broken human being in need of divine grace just as much as the person with whom you differ. As for the other person, no matter how different from you, he or she is still an individual created in the image of God and deserving of dignity and respect.

In the last verse of today's Scripture passage, believers are reminded that as members of God's people, we're insiders, and we have a responsibility to love our brothers and sisters in Christ and to fear God. As participants in the larger society, we're now, more than ever, outsiders. But we still have a responsibility to honor everyone. And that means everyone. The Muslim, the LGBT person, the person whose race or ethnicity is different from yours, the person whose politics are polar opposite your own, and the list could go on.

I'm not saying you should surrender your convictions and commitments. I share many of them. I'm simply saying that every day, you share space in this world with those who are different from you and with whom you differ. We're working in the same offices and the same factories. We're shopping in the same stores and standing in the same checkout lines. We're learning in the same classrooms and sitting in the same waiting rooms. We're playing on the same fields and exercising in the same gyms. We're driving on the same freeways and living on the same streets. In some cases, thank God, we're even sitting in the same pews. The bottom line is, we share a common life with other human beings in our society. And we're still learning how to live respectfully and civilly alongside others with whom we may radically disagree, for the sake of the common good.

And when we're outside the walls of the church, that's one of the best opportunities we have to really be the church, and to demonstrate to the world that being a Christian isn't just about the opinions you hold or the positions you take, though those are certainly important. The Christian faith is also about how you treat other people. It's about how you love your neighbor. It's about how you relate to other human beings who are in this world that God still loves and is determined to redeem. So as today's Scripture says, you and I are to live honorably among others, displaying holiness to the world, "so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he comes to judge" (v. 12).

¹ This is Richard Mouw's summary of Marty's assessment, in the *On Being* podcast, "Restoring Political Civility: An Evangelical View." August 18, 2011. Accessed July 2, 2015 <http://www.onbeing.org/program/restoring-political-civility-evangelical-view/transcript/728#main_content>.