

FIRST PETER 2:11–12. (EHV)

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and temporary residents in the world, to abstain from the desires of the sinful flesh, which war against your soul. Live an honorable life among the Gentiles so that even though they slander you as evildoers, when they observe your noble deeds, they may glorify God on the day he visits us.

During my vicar year or pastoral internship, my supervising pastor led a Bible class for adults based on a book titled *I'm a Christian, Even at Work*. I didn't get to sit in on the class, since I had to lead a teen Bible class at the same time. But I remember him telling me how the class was prompting a lot of good discussion and opening members' eyes to things they hadn't thought about before.

Does that surprise you, that a book titled *I'm a Christian, Even at Work* was an eye-opener for some Christians? I think it should surprise us. While some of the Ten Commandments direct our thoughts most naturally to our life as *church* members, such as "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy," or to our life at *home*, such as "Honor your father and mother" and "You shall not commit adultery," most of the commandments apply most naturally to non-Sundays and the 9-to-5 workday, that is, to our interactions with others *outside of* church and home. And even "Remember the Sabbath Day" and "Honor your father and mother" and "You shall not commit adultery," at heart, have a lot to say about our interactions in the community, and not just at home or at church.

It should surprise us that the idea of Christianity also applying to work and to life in society is an eye-opening one for some Christians. Then again, maybe it shouldn't. How many countless people do we interact with, how many countless faces are flashed on the screens in front of us who are not afraid to identify themselves as Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist, Lutheran, or some other stripe of Christian, but have no problem defrauding their employees or customers, defrauding the government on their tax returns, cheating on their spouses or just sleeping around, going through marriages like toilet paper, shamelessly badmouthing the president and other elected leaders, cursing, swearing, or using just plain foul language, losing their tempers at municipal meetings, and engaging in countless other evils?

And as we keep going down the list of evils, at some point sooner or later we have to ask ourselves, "Wait, am I talking about others, or am I talking about myself?"

Brothers and sisters, when Jesus called us to faith, he called us to a new life that encompasses *all* of life, not just certain days or select portions of it. That's what we want to review today as we listen to what the Scriptures have to say about Christian life in society.

1. View of Earthly Life and Society

In order to talk about life in society, we first need to address the way we view life on earth as a whole and the way we view humanity as a whole. Peter gives us a good illustration here for our lives on earth: "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and temporary residents in the world, to abstain from the desires of the sinful flesh, which war against your soul." We are aliens, foreigners, and temporary residents in the world. We are like people on an extended stay at a hotel. My wife and I stayed at a hotel in Hill City for a week last year to celebrate our tenth anniversary. When you're at a hotel for a whole week, on the one hand, you get comfortable

there. You familiarize yourself with more of the hotel's amenities: You figure out how the waffle or pancake machine works, take note of the pool hours, make use of the trout stream running through the backyard, make use of shelves, drawers, closets, and other amenities in your room that you normally wouldn't, get acquainted with the stores and restaurants in town, maybe even participate in local events or activities. You treat the staff and other guests with respect and politeness, maybe even ask some questions and get to know them better, because you might see them again tomorrow or later that week, and you want to enjoy a pleasant atmosphere. On the other hand, you don't get too comfortable or too attached to anything or anyone. You're always mindful of the fact that you're eventually leaving. This isn't your home.

That is our life on earth as Christians.

As for how we view humanity as a whole, we need only go to the well-known passage, John 3:16: "For God so loved *the world*, that he gave his one and only Son..." Jesus lived a holy life for all. Jesus shed his lifeblood for all. He did not die for some more than for others. The umbrella of his redeeming work did not leave some out in the rain.

If Jesus gave his life for all, that means that God has imposed the same value on all people, regardless of color, ethnicity, language, ability, age, or any other qualifier. That value, that price tag is this: worth the expenditure of the precious blood of God's own Son.

You have never encountered anyone—I don't care how much they rubbed you the wrong way or how much of a curmudgeon they are—you have never encountered anyone worth less than you. You have never encountered anyone for whom Jesus did not shed his blood. You have never encountered anyone whom God does not love with an all-surpassing love.

So if *God* loves everyone, what should be *our* attitude toward everyone? We should love them too. The most basic command when considering God's will for our life in society is, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Loving them does not mean we have to have warm fuzzies for them; it means that we regard them as people for whom Christ died and that we always seek to do what is best for them, regardless of how we feel about them. We heard Paul's words to the Galatians earlier: "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people" (Gal. 6:10). Help and befriend them in their bodily needs. Help them improve and protect their property and means of income. Defend them, speak well of them, and take their words and actions in the kindest possible way. Set a good example for them in the way you act and speak. Honor, serve, and obey them if they are in authority over you.

Peter also reminds us what our goal is as we do this. It isn't just to make the world a better place, or even just to make Christ happy. "Live an honorable life among the Gentiles so that even though they slander you as evildoers, when they observe your noble deeds, they may glorify God on the day he visits us." Your goal is to win souls for heaven. People can and do argue with doctrine and slander organized religion, but it is extremely difficult to argue with love. It is extremely difficult to say to another person, "Your religion is worthless," when that person is consistently treating you in a fundamentally different way than most, treating you in a way that reflects your value and worth as a soul bought with Christ's blood. Little else so attracts people, especially skeptics, to the Christian Church and the gospel of Christ like Christian love does.

2. Driving Force of Society

Second, we need to realize what holds sway in society, what makes it go, so to speak. Here we need to talk about the doctrine of the two kingdoms of God—the kingdom of the Word and the kingdom of the sword, the kingdom that cares primarily for souls and the kingdom that cares primarily for bodies, the kingdom of the Church and the kingdom of the State. In the Church the gospel holds sway, but in the State or civil government, the law holds sway, because society is also made up of unbelievers and people who care nothing for God. Thus, if there is to be any good accomplished in society, society needs to be forced and compelled to do it by reward on the one hand and threat of punishment on the other. That is the realm of the law.

The godless employee does his job well, generally speaking, not because he cares about others, but because he makes a living if he does it well, and fired if he doesn't. The godless politician supports beneficial legislation because the voters are watching. Rape, robbery, and murder are restrained because people don't want to get fined, imprisoned, or worse.

This is precisely why your show of love in society has such a huge impact. In a world where most are doing the right thing because they have to, it is a breath of fresh air to encounter Christians doing the right thing because they want to. In a world where mechanics are fixing your car because they want to feed their family and not get sued, it is a breath of fresh air to encounter a Christian who fixes your car because he is genuinely concerned about your possessions and your transportation ability. In a world where employers give their employees fair pay and benefits because it's mandated by law, it is a breath of fresh air to encounter a Christian employer who gives his employees fair pay and benefits, perhaps even more than what is mandated, because he is generous and genuinely cares about their lives and their families outside of work.

Nevertheless, civil government with its rule of law is a valid institution of God. We heard Peter sum up what our attitude should be toward civil government earlier. Paul says the same in Romans 13: "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God. Therefore the one who rebels against the authority is opposing God's institution, and those who oppose will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to evil. Would you like to have no fear of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will receive praise from him, because he is God's servant for your benefit. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because he does not carry the sword without reason. He is God's servant, a punisher to bring wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore it is necessary to submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience. For this reason you also pay taxes, because the authorities are God's ministers, who are employed to do this very thing. Pay what you owe to all of them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed."

One application of this—and I need to remember it just as much as anyone else—is the way we speak about our president and other elected officials. We often equate conservatism with Christianity. While there are certainly elements of conservatism that align with Christianity, the two need to be distinguished. Conservatism is a political ideology; Christianity is a religion. Fox News might be more conservative, but when they disrespectfully rail against our elected officials, that is not Christian. If we have a problem with our elected officials, there are better,

godly ways to address those problems than simply railing against them over a cup of coffee. We can call them. We can write to them. We can and should pray to the Lord for them and about them. We can go to the voting booth or run for office ourselves.

Speaking of which, when we vote, we shouldn't just vote. We should also pray that God would bless our vote, and then remember that Jesus still reigns on the throne of heaven, no matter who gets elected. And when we are researching the candidates beforehand, it is good to look for those who will, as much as possible, uphold God's moral standards. We heard last week that marriage should be honored by *all*. We heard in the First Lesson today that righteousness lifts up a nation, while sin brings shame to a people. Our first concern should not be, "How will this candidate's ideology affect my wallet?" Our first concern should be, "How will this candidate's ideology uphold the standards of God's law and benefit the state or country at large?"

Furthermore, since we do uphold the civil government and its rule by law, that means that we also uphold its God-given right to have an army, to wage war, and to execute criminals. Paul said the government does not bear the sword for nothing, and when the soldiers asked John the Baptist what they should do, he did not say, "Leave the army." Not all killing is murder. If God has given you authority to kill within a legitimate government, then you may kill within your sphere of responsibility to the glory of God.

However, before joining the armed forces and going off to war, a Christian soldier will want to be as sure as he can that the war his country is engaging in is just. A just war keeps a number of biblical principles in mind.

First, the war should be waged for a just cause. It shouldn't just be, "Well, it's springtime, let's go and see how many nations we can take over." Typically, a just cause means that the welfare and safety of a nation's citizens are at stake.

Second, the war should be waged as a last resort. Other efforts at negotiation should have taken place first in an attempt to avoid the shedding of blood.

Third, the war should be waged with a reasonable probability of success. If there is no probability of success, then a government is intentionally wasting human life by waging war.

Fourth, the war should be waged with proportionate means. Just as a family always has to ask, "Can we afford it?" and if they can't, they shouldn't do it, so a government has to ask the same before going to war.

Finally, the war should be waged in such a way that due regard is given for the innocent, especially women and children, so that, as much as possible, more life isn't taken than necessary to win the war.

If we are ordinary civilians, we also need to give our Christian soldiers the benefit of the doubt. Even if we ourselves do not think a war is just, we have the benefit of looking at it from the outside. Once a soldier is enrolled in the armed forces, he does not have that benefit to the same extent. Once he is enrolled, it is his job to trust his superiors and follow their orders, because if he does not, he is putting the lives of his fellow soldiers at risk.

The last thing we need to say about God's other kingdom, the civil government, is what Peter says in Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." If the government explicitly mandates something that is contrary to God's will as clearly expressed in his word, then we not only may, but also should disobey it. That doesn't mean we riot and rebel, as we heard Paul say earlier. It means we simply disobey. If we know it will mean consequences, we have two choices

—humbly accept the potential consequences or move to a different place or country that doesn't have those consequences.

In closing, let us thank God that we not only live in the kingdom of the law, like all people do, but that we also live in the kingdom of the gospel. Thank God that he has given us the motivation through Christ *to want* to do what others must be *forced* to do. Thank God that we have the good news of life eternal beyond this earthly life of sweat, tears, and death. Thank God that he has placed us in a kingdom of the law that, up to the present, has protected our right to promote the kingdom of the gospel and to preach the full and free forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus. Thank God that he has equipped us not just with the ability to make our society better, but also to save the souls within that society by telling them of our ultimate king, Jesus, who gave his life for you and for me and for the whole world. And let us glorify God who has given us all these blessings not just with our prayers and songs on Sunday, but also with a Christian life in the society in which he has placed us. Amen.