

## Prayers

### To God

*Pray with liberty of heart, and if you do not feel like it, then stay silent before the Lord until He sets you free. There is no bar to His freedom that cannot be overcome in an instant, if we will embrace God's presence in that instant.*

### For myself

*Pray with kindness for those you do not wish to show kindness. Pray with generosity for those you do not wish to show generosity. Pray with love for those you do not wish to show love. In so doing, you will be far more blessed than if you had just told God your problems with these people!*

### For others

Weekly theme: the beauty of life

**Come to us, Lord Jesus, and show us again the wonders of Your love. For You have come to live in those who love You, and who share this divine quality in their deeds and their words. Through Your people You can indeed change the world yet again, and in our own generation stir people's hearts to stand against what is wrong and evil, and show the world that love, truth, integrity, and righteousness can be made to work as a basis for a progressive and liberating society. Give us a heart to believe we can change the world again! AMEN**

## Meditation

Come, Lord Jesus, come!

Break this faulty, evil world of ours,  
by quiet peace and love  
and all the quality of deep forgiveness;  
Transform the hearts and souls and minds  
of those who live in sin, entrapped.

Remove the stubborn selfishness,  
which ever robs the world  
of heart and soul and mind and strength;  
Extract the foolish, stubborn vice  
by which the enemy's footholds gains.

Forgive the tired repentant hearts,  
restore the blood that rises  
soon to surge in hearts to make a difference;  
Clean the unclean fresh felt wounds  
and preach to teach the moral truths of life.

Restore in risen power truest life,  
challenge all the stubbornness  
and lift up eyes up higher still to highest sight;  
Then let the outrageous zeal of youth here reign  
To generate life's hope of greater glory.

Come Lord Jesus, come!

## Bible Passage

### 1 Peter 2:13-17

<sup>13</sup> Submit yourselves to every human institution, for the Lord's sake: whether to the Emperor, as the highest authority, <sup>14</sup> or to governors, who are appointed by Him to pass judgement on criminals and to approve those who do right. <sup>15</sup> For it is God's will that by doing good in this way you should silence the ignorant and unspiritual words of foolish people. <sup>16</sup> Live as people who are free, without using this freedom as a cover for evil; live rather as servants of God. <sup>17</sup> Show due respect to everyone; love the family of God's people; fear God; and respect the Emperor.

## Review

Given everything Peter has just said about God's people being a '*holy nation, a royal priesthood ...*' (2:9), his readers and hearers might well ask, why they should respect the Emperor? Peter has just told baptised converts their highest allegiance is indeed to God and to Jesus Christ, the '*cornerstone*' (2:6), and they are living as temporary residents in the world until the coming of the Kingdom of God (2:11,12). With preaching like this it is easy to see why some had scant regard for the state, and refused to pay taxes to Rome!

Aware of this, however, Peter writes to warn people that their mission in this world will be compromised if they do not live at peace with the state. The principle he describes is clear; God is the highest authority, but the state and earthly institutions require our allegiance, so we may live at peace so we have the freedom and peace to preach the Gospel as God has commanded us.

This message is very similar to that found in Romans 13:1-7, and both Peter and Paul had arrived at this conclusion because of their experiences in spreading the Gospel in the early days of the church. They were both able to preach the Gospel because of general peace within the Roman Empire and they were free to travel anywhere. When there was trouble, both Peter and Paul sometimes had their difficulties with the authorities, but often, it was not the authorities who were the problem but those who rioted or made trouble. Paul certainly made use of Roman laws to his own advantage on several occasions (see the riot in Ephesus in Acts 19). So both apostles taught respect for earthly authorities, whilst reserving the highest allegiance for God the Father.

In this passage, Peter refers to the function of worldly authority to maintain peace and provide for social cohesion (2:14). He is keen that the Gospel has good grounds in which to grow, for where liberty and justice flourish, 'good' exposes foolishness (2:15). We may argue today whether all states perform this function properly, because there are plenty of examples of repressive societies in which this does not happen. Peter had no experience of this and so does not talk about it. We must rely on the Old Testament to help us consider how best to deal with things like oppression, for example, in the story of Daniel, or Esther.

There is no doubt, however, that a society that based on principles of personal freedom, basic human justice, and freedom of expression is good grounds for the Gospel to grow, as it has been throughout history. Such is the right platform for Christian discipleship and living as 'servants of God' (2:16). But of course, there is no escape from the powers of evil which can even use these good things as a 'cover for evil' (2:16). The Gospel can grow and fight evil where basic human freedoms are respected.

## Going Deeper

### Notes on the text and translation

#### V13 'the highest authority'

##### Other translations:

'supreme authority' (NIV)

'supreme' (NRSV)

The Greek word used here ('huperechonti') means 'supreme'. However the sense of the word is of the highest of earthly authorities, and I have retained this because by using this phrase, we avoid the implication that this has anything to do with God's 'supreme' authority.

#### V17 'show due respect to everyone'

##### Other translations:

'have respect' (NJB)

'honour everyone' (NRSV, CEB, ESV etc.)

Most translations you will read have 'Honour everyone ...' However, the Greek word 'timaō' conveys the idea of regard and respect, and in the light of the current strong use of the word 'respect' in modern English, I reckon that it is the best word to convey what is meant here. Few people readily speak of 'honour' and it is often used negatively.

## Further Comments

### Submission

There is hardly a society which has not been the subject of intense debate about whether it is worthy of the trust it demands from its citizens, and this was no different in Peter's day. In the early days of the church, the Roman state was no real threat to the Gospel, and the church grew freely, battered more by opposition from other religious groups and social interests than the authorities (with the peculiar exception of Nero's persecution of Christians in 64AD). As it grew, the pattern changed, and by the second century, state persecution became more acute, though not enforced across the whole Empire.

In general, though, the faithful and loving witness of the Christian community throughout the early centuries has won converts, and Peter's advice has proved to be prophetic of the growth of the early church. The church remained largely subject to the Roman authorities, it accepted its judgements on matters of natural justice, people respected others and were respected (2:17) and were able to live in fellowship with each other and the Lord, as well as honour the Emperor (2:17).

### ***Problems with the Romans State***

The one issue which created tension was the fact that some Emperors believed they were gods, and required all citizens to pour out sacrificial 'libations' of fluids, either drinks or animal blood, by way of worship of the Emperor and proving allegiance to Rome. Those who did not do this were liable to the death penalty. As a matter of fact, neither Peter's words here nor Paul's words in Romans 13 figured highly in the church's debate in later centuries about what should be done in such circumstances. The leaders of the early church decided that no-one who poured out a libation to the Emperor as god could remain in fellowship with the church!

Early Christians seem to have been willing on the one hand to accept that all power and authority came ultimately from God and was wielded on earth by the Roman state; on the other hand they had no difficulty with confronting authority if they judged that it was being exercised wrongly. Since then, this has largely been the Christian attitude towards 'the state', and it has never wholly embraced a totally revolutionary stance except where it has identified the state as irredeemably corrupt and evil. Whether or not any particular country or state is indeed 'evil' has always been a subject of debate, but this debate always has the same scriptural starting point.

### ***A peaceful life***

Everyone wants a peaceful life! Verse 14 is Peter's description of the responsibility of the authorities to maintain law and order on the basis of sound justice. There is no detailed description of justice in this passage but there is a clear assumption that justice is the basis of a peaceful society. For example, people can live in peace if they have confidence that criminals will be caught and punished suitably (though punishment is something of a cultural issue) and good behaviour is rewarded (2:14). In the Roman system, the burden of this justice lay with the Roman governors who ruled each region of the Empire (as Pilate ruled Judea when Jesus was brought before him).

Just beneath the surface of what Peter says, however, lurks the spectre of insurrection and revolt against Rome. Jesus had spent his entire ministry avoiding public hopes of insurrection against Rome, and Peter had been a witness of all this. Jewish desires to gain liberty from Rome resulted in sporadic fighting in Judea and Israel in the middle of the first century, resulting in the sacking of Jerusalem by Roman forces in 70 AD. This led to great upheavals for vast numbers of people who fled Jerusalem, and it also led to the disbandment of the Jerusalem church and the creation of Rome as the leading church of the known world. Perhaps without the example of Jesus and the teaching of Peter and Paul, Christians would have been targeted at that time as well as Jews, and suffered far more as a consequence.

### ***Freedom, love and respect***

For these reasons, it is likely that when Peter said 'it is God's will that by doing good ... you should silence the ignorant and unspiritual words of foolish people' (2:15), he was referring to those who advocated an active policy of resistance against Rome along the line of the Jewish Zealots. He probably meant the same when talking about those who used 'freedom as a cover for evil' (2:16). In every society there have always been people like the Jewish Zealots who have used the peaceful life of others as a cover for their own more revolutionary ideas. Peter urged his readers and listeners to be people of peace however, who live as 'servants of God' (2:16).

This phrase has been criticised in recent years because as explained above, it means 'slaves of God'; but it is not necessary for us to import our own notions of slavery on to what Peter writes. The basic idea is the same as that found in yesterday's text, in which the Christian is one who is wholly committed to following the Lord, a person living in this world but dedicated to the call of God and the pursuit of the Gospel and the Kingdom.

Peter concludes this passage by a brief summary of what it means to be 'servant (slaves) of God'. The elements are listed in verse 17 in no particular order, and I summarise them like this;

- Respect everyone
- Love the church family
- Worship and serve God
- Respect the state

You will observe that in this summary I have replaced 'Emperor' with 'the state' because few of us today live under the authority of Emperors, but most of us live under the authority of a state. I have also changed the phrase 'fear God' to 'worship God', because the expression 'the fear of God' carries with it the idea of worship and service. With these amendments, this is a useful short memo from Peter about how we should all live.

## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***Living in the world but not of the world***

Peter's fourfold advice is worth remembering and using as a model of Christian attitude and behaviour. Unless we respect all people, we will not have the right attitude to the work of evangelism to which we have all been called; for no one will hear the Word from us unless we tell them respectfully. Secondly, it does a great disservice to the Kingdom of God if we harbour unhappiness and strife within the body of Christ, and refuse to accept Christ's command to His own, to 'love one another'. Thirdly, the worship and service of God Almighty is non-negotiable for a Christian, and this means giving it absolute priority, not the casual attention which is given by some people today; the church of God needs its people to be one hundred percent with it and behind it if it is to meet people's spiritual needs and also honour the Lord. Finally, 'respect the state' which has been the subject of our study today, and without which, Christian witness is compromised.

The full relevance of this little list can be seen by noting what happens when any one of them is neglected by God's people. There are many churches today which are 'seeking a vision' of what the Lord would have them do, sincerely wanting to gain a sense of direction when living in a world which makes little sense and faced with impossibly large tasks. The four headings within 1 Peter 2:17 are a good starting point for such an exploration because they root the Christian church in right attitudes towards others, towards the church, towards God and towards the world. When we are in the right place before God, we should not have to wait long for Him to tell us what we should be doing!

## ***Ideas for what to do***

- *Over a period of a week, write out the list from 1 Peter 2:17 each day and keep the piece of paper with this written on close by, in a pocket or handbag. Refer to it frequently, and discover how useful its advice is!*
- *When with people in the world at large, bear in mind the first and last item in the list above, and when in church, bear in mind the second and third. Share this idea with one or two others, and see what they think.*

## ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Do you think that this passage of scripture implies we should be content to live under evil rulers? How can we defeat state evil with good?
2. Discuss ways in which being 'free' can be a cover for 'evil' as in verse 16.
3. Is it realistic for us to be obedient to everything that Peter says in verse 17? Why is it that some people find it hard to love the family of the Church?

## **Final Prayer**

Lord God, gracious Father:  
I offer myself in quietness,  
I give myself to Your work,  
I constantly seek Your will,  
I long to know more of You,  
I trust You for everything,  
I will not cease to love You,  
And I praise Your Holy Name:  
AMEN