

1 Peter 2:9-17
(Jeremiah 29:4-7; Mark 12:13-17)
“Living As Free People”

Introduction

These verses are quite astonishing when we remember the historical context of this letter: Peter is writing during the reign of Nero to a group of people facing persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. They refuse to bow the knee at the imperial shrine, offer a sacrifice and say, “Caesar is Lord.” Instead, they stubbornly insist that they have but one Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. And for that they are hounded, persecuted and killed. Peter will go on to write, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (4:12-13). Peter himself will soon face a martyr’s death. Yet he writes, not of rebellion and revolution, but of being “subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to the emperor as supreme, or to governors” (2:13-14). He will say something even more astonishing in the light of all we know about Nero: “Honor the emperor.” When you read those words, remember the man who used Christians as living torches for his garden parties.

These words are all the more remarkable when we think about the personality of the author of this letter, Simon Peter, a man of explosive personality who drew his sword and cut off the ear of a soldier sent by the religious authorities to arrest his Lord. Peter was not meek by nature, nor was he one inclined to submit to anyone or anything. Nor did he ever confuse the claims of the state with the claims of God. When ordered not to preach any longer in Jesus’ name, he answered, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). But here we see the work of God’s Spirit making him increasingly like the one whom he called Lord. These words breathe the Spirit of Jesus, and if we would understand how we are to live as Christian citizens in whatever nation we find ourselves, we do well to hear and heed these words.

Here we see Peter lay out our responsibility to live in this present age as “sojourners and exiles” who know that our true citizenship is elsewhere. Yet he also calls us to “live as people who are free,” and as free men and women to “be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.” *Here is the tension:* We are citizens of two kingdoms, first of a transitory, imperfect human institution – in the case of most of us that institution is the United States of America. But second, we are also citizens of God’s Kingdom, a kingdom ruled perfectly by the One who made us, redeemed us, and who alone has absolute claim to our allegiance. Peter sets in counterpoint the reality of our lives, the nature of our dual citizenship. He reminds us of our responsibilities both to God’s Kingdom, and to the human kingdom or nation where we live. He uses language that makes clear where our ultimate allegiance lies, and yet does not call us to shirk our responsibility to the earthly kingdom.

Our nation places the highest value on freedom. This July Fourth weekend, we remember the legacy of freedom that has been our nation's greatest blessing and her greatest challenge. Yet for many, perhaps for most people in our culture, freedom is confused with license, with the freedom to be or do whatever we want. There is little sense, little stomach, for the cost of real freedom. Such cheap and selfish notions of freedom always lead in the end to bondage. So it is good to reflect this holiday weekend on the nature of freedom in the light of our dual citizenship. How do these verses help us understand what it means to be temporal citizens of this nation that we love, and eternal citizens of God's Kingdom? Three things come clear.

Body

- 1. First, we should realize the cost of freedom: Self-sacrifice.**
- 2. Second, we should realize the goal of freedom: God's glory, others' good.**
- 3. Finally, we should realize the mark of free people: Honor toward all.**

Conclusion

In the end, it is not about us – not even our cherished freedom. It is all about laying down our rights and prerogatives and loving others, even those who would do us harm, so that they might know the wonder of God's grace and mercy, given so freely to us. It will cost us our self-indulgence, but it will lead to greater freedom and joy than we can yet conceive, for it will lead toward the day when the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

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