

## Nation-building #7

### Mic Drop

I'm about to read some Bible scriptures that will make your brain hurt, so perhaps I should explain what world you've entered with this podcast! I'm David Rowe, co-pastor of the Greenfield Hill Congregational Church in Fairfield, Connecticut. With our nation's 250th anniversary coming next year, I planned this series on citizenship, governance, leadership, with extra attention to what the Bible can teach us on those topics. This is Episode 7, the toughest so far.

Now, here's that scripture from what Paul wrote to the Romans, Chapter 13. He wrote: *Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. They've been established by God. To rebel against the authorities is to rebel against God, for the governing authority is God's servant to do you good. But it's an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*

Well, that's un-American. Most of those early 17th century colonialists were fleeing some old country despot. Once settled and organized, the 18th century would-be Americans became traitorous, treasonous, insurrectionists, overthrowing the governing authorities here and thumbing their nose at King George over there. They did not submit, and they totally rejected Paul's take on the divine right of kings.

The 1800 years between Paul's optimistic subservience to Caesar and American refugees from Europe's monarchy and tyranny resulted in a new attitude toward authority: We don't much like it.

Now, before I dismiss Paul totally, let's admit that his partner in church leadership, Peter, fully agrees with him. *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men.* That's what Peter wrote, only to be executed by one such authority instituted among men, Caesar, and his Roman Empire. These verses come from a tough, controversial chapter during which Peter continues the same theme. *Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters. Wives, be submissive to your husbands.*

At least no one is sleeping through this podcast, not yet! And at least Peter is consistent. Because these words of Peter are in the Bible, we grant them extra weight. But the Bible is a masterful storyteller, and the stories about Peter in the Bible reveal him to be very human. Human, which includes fallible, the ability to be wrong. Peter was courageous

and weak, arrogant and faithful, skeptical and demanding, afraid and repentant and loving. He was that complex, as we all are.

Peter's worldview was not complex. His universe's chain of command had God at the top, Caesar running things down here, and Peter himself in charge of his small but growing religious kingdom. A kingdom not of this earth, but a kingdom nevertheless. The result? God in heaven tells us what's what. Caesar in Rome tells us what's what. Peter in Jerusalem tells us what's what. Each authority in its rightful place, keeping the rest of us in line vis-a-vis the church (Peter's) and state (Caesar's).

I'm calling this episode Mic Drop. If I understand the slang correctly, Mic Drop refers to saying something that is the final word, ends all debate, nothing more need be said.

When it comes to what the New Testament part of the Bible says about a citizen's relationship to government, the words of Peter and Paul are meant to stop debate. In short, they say whoever is over you is put there by God, so keep your head down, your mouth shut, submit and obey, and all will be well. These are hard verses that defy explanation. How can we live in today's world, or really in any time in history, and accept that whoever is in charge of anything -- and that's what the Bible is talking about when it says submit to every authority instituted among men -- how can we accept that God put them in charge and accept that we must submit and obey no matter what?

Well, let's see. *Sitz im Leben* was a key term in seminary for understanding the Bible. It is a German term for *situation*, the *setting in life* of the Scriptures that you're studying. What was the context, we should ask, the political or social reality surrounding a biblical story or person or passage? And does knowing the *Sitz im Leben* help you appreciate the verse during the time it was written and help you decide how to apply it to today?

The *Sitz im Leben* for Paul and Peter was much the same. The Roman Empire was the absolute ruling authority, ruthless in maintaining that authority. At the same time, Paul and Peter were laying the groundwork for a whole new approach to religion, what would become Christianity. To survive, they needed to survive, literally. To be on the wrong side of Caesar or his minions was to court crucifixion. To stay on the right side of Caesar meant reassuring those governing authorities that gatherings of Christians were not a threat to their governing or their authority.

And in those days, when dealing with a Caesar, to be reassuring meant to be submissive in the most obsequious manner. Look up *bowing and scraping*, servile, passive.

Furthermore, in those early days of creating Christianity, people like Paul and Peter were focused on the imminent return of Jesus, literally coming back to earth, ultimately triumphant. Their job was to get people ready. This cataclysmic event would be earth-shaking in the most profound sense of the word. Jesus' "final exam", so fully explained in Matthew chapter 25, imagines the greatest of joys for those who love with the depth of Jesus' love. But it also imagines the worst of worst awaiting those whose lack of caring unmasks their lack of real belief. The promise of heaven and the threat of hell motivated the early church to save as many as possible. It was almost a single-minded focus. Upsetting apple carts, challenging tradition and culture were not their agenda.

This explains early policies like *women keep silent in the church* and ongoing adherence to circumcision, and kosher dietary laws and promises to submit to governing authorities. Simply stated, their business was to save souls, not fix cultures or build nations. Paul and Peter's deal with the devil, the Roman governing authorities, was to promise "we won't be a threat to you, you won't be a bother to us."

It didn't work. Not for the Jews of Israel, obliterated by Rome in 70 AD, and scattered to the ends of the earth. Not for the Christians of the Roman Empire: Paul and Peter themselves ended up murdered by those very governing authorities established "by God to do good." Christian believers suffered unspeakable horrors for the first three authorities. This podcast isn't long enough to list all the despicable leaders in every authority "instituted among men." Make your own list. All the Hitlers of history, large and small, at every level of power, every kind of authority: mean bosses, cruel coaches, abusive heads of charities and volunteer organizations, people who belittle and demean and hurt and backstab and destroy. And we are to accept that God put them in their authority and keeps them in authority to continue to do their worst?

So what do we do with today's verses? The Bible says of itself that "all Scripture is profitable for instruction." And that can be just as true when we have to rethink some of that instruction. Joshua's order to kill every man, woman, child, and animal in Jericho. Jesus calling a woman a dog, a woman who had only asked help for her sick child. Paul telling us that anyone in authority is God's servant. They don't pass the smell test but they do make us think which is an absolute essential of good citizenship.

Well then, what should we think and do when someone is in authority whose behavior, actions, beliefs are so contrary to yours? Other than leading an open rebellion or a clandestine insurrection, we are left with facing reality. The person in power has power. Nowadays, they mostly get there by election, and they continue to be there by various shades of democracy and elections. There is a veneer of legitimacy. To undermine that looks like being a sore loser and makes you look like the very behaviors you stand against. In seminary, one of my professors warned, if you must become the beast to defeat the beast, it does not matter who wins.

Jesus' approach was radically different. Radically. To follow Christ-like living while facing political realities of the day is radical. It is outside the box, beyond the pale, a stretch, a risk, and it comes with great cost. At the least, it costs sacrifice, patience, endurance, and it requires hope, an eternal hope. Hope for the short term, that what you're doing is right, and hope for the long term, that what you're doing is worth it. And being worth it, winning, may not be in the conventional sense, like waving a banner or shouting "we're number one," or being put in charge or having a parade in your honor. It could be the simple faith that doing the right thing is the right thing, and the right thing wins in the long run. And the long run may be when we get to heaven, or the long run may be when your grandchildren are taking leadership and authority in their America, and it's good.

Now, I've been hard on St. Peter and St. Paul today, so let me offer a closing positive word. I said earlier that we should look at Bible verses in their *Sitz im Leben*, in their context and situation, in their larger setting. Well, we can do the same with today's tough verses from Peter and Paul: put them within the larger setting of their whole lives, their whole body of work. Their basic message is that we are to stand apart from the evils and corruptions of the day. We're different. We choose to be different. We're okay with being different. There's a wonderful verse where Peter is trying to lift our sights, our self-image. So he calls us "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people." A *peculiar* people. And that's said as a compliment. To be peculiar. We stand out from the crowd.

I know you're as frustrated as I am walking into a pharmacy finding stuff that you want locked behind plexiglass because too many other people are shoplifting, and the legal system seems to be okay with it, and society puts up with it, and corporations won't fight it. So why don't *we* do it? Why don't we grab some stuff and walk out of the store? Because we're not like that. We're peculiar that way. Our world is rife with ugliness, meanness, crassness of every kind at every level. It's all around us. It's the way things are.

We can get to stand in the middle and be part of it or stand outside it. Yep, some people will think we're peculiar and they'll be right.

Until the next episode, God bless you.