

1 Peter

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Date: 13 October 2013

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[0 : 00] If only we listened to God. What a different world this would be, if only we listened to God. Indeed, what a wonderful world this would be. I'm sure there's a song there somewhere. If only we listened. In verse 17 of 1 Peter chapter 2, we are given a few choice words of instruction that if obeyed would transform the world. They would transform our nation, our neighborhoods, our schools, our workplaces, our churches, our lives, your life. Show proper respect to everyone. Love the brotherhood of believers. Fear God. Honor the King. They're simple words, easy to understand.

Just think about it for a while. Things really would be very different if we listened and obeyed these God-given instructions. Now, you might think it's being rather naive, somewhat utopic, to imagine that everybody will listen and obey, but we can surely begin by looking at ourselves as believers. The words of God through Peter are directed to Christians. We, as Christians, are under a particular obligation to live in the manner required. That's not to say that those who are not Christians are freed from these obligations, but we are under a particular obligation. And as we do, we model God's order to others. As we follow and obey these instructions of God, the lives that we live can be seen by others, and they can discover that God's way is indeed a better way.

[2 : 37] These exhortations found there in verse 17, we might call them a charter of Christian citizenship, or if we put it another way. In these words, in verse 17, we have a pretty comprehensive answer to the question, what do Christians do? Just what do Christians do? Well, this is what Christians do.

We show proper respect to everyone. We love the brotherhood of believers. We fear God. We honor the King. For that certainly is what we ought to do. I want us to consider these obligations in turn, but one thing we need to do to clarify one introductory matter, I suppose, is to establish if Peter presents to us three or four duties. Now, if you have followed the reading, especially if you were looking at your Bible as the verse was being read, you may have noticed the manner in which the verse is punctuated in the version of the Bible that we are using. You'll notice there in verse 17, we have, show proper respect to everyone, and there the punctuation is such that it suggests that this is an umbrella obligation that is then fleshed out in three subsequent obligations. Show proper respect to everyone. Okay, what does that look like? What does that involve? Well, it involves these things.

Love the brotherhood of believers. Fear God. Honor the King. And so, really, what you have are three duties, and they're described in this broad way by the first one. I would suggest that that isn't the most helpful way of understanding what Peter is saying. I'm not saying that it's not a defensible way of understanding what is being said, but I don't think it is the most helpful, and I don't think it was Peter's intention. I think what we have here, rather, are four distinct obligations, that there is overlap between them, that they are connected one with the other. Indeed, but they are four distinct obligations. Certainly, that is the manner in which we are going to consider them this morning. Show proper respect to everyone. What Peter actually says is much briefer, much more succinct. It's simply, honor everyone. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Indeed, he doesn't say of believers. It's all much neater in his original presentation. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the King. Four obligations that we are under as Christians. There also follows another matter of less significance, but I'll just mention it very briefly to then move on to consider these obligations. There's a matter of the order in which the duties are presented.

And whether it's significant, the order in which they're presented. I don't think it is particularly significant. And certainly for the purposes of what we're going to say this morning, I'm going to consider these four duties in the following order, somewhat different to the order that we have them

in verse 17. In the following order. First of all, fear God. That's where we're going to begin. It seems a reasonable place to begin. Fear God. Then we're going to consider the next obligation. Love the brotherhood. Then honor everyone. And then finally honor the King. And as is almost inevitable on these occasions, by the time we get to honor the King, we'll have run out of time, so we'll deal with that very briefly. But we did touch on that a couple of weeks ago. And we will deliberately, not just because that's the way things go, we will deliberately focus the bulk of our attention on the first of these duties that really serves as a foundation for those that follow. Fear God. So let's begin by considering this first duty that is placed upon us by God through Peter. Fear God. Now, is this something that we would even want to do? I ask you very directly, you can answer in your own mind and heart, do you want to fear God? Is that an attractive prospect? Is it a good thing to fear God? The Greek verb that Peter employs is the verb phobeo, and the corresponding noun is phobia. And I mention it simply because we can immediately recognize that word phobia in English. Now, phobias are bad things, aren't they? What about a God phobia? I wonder, is that what Christians are afflicted with? I'm sure some people would say that. Oh, these Christians, they're afflicted with this God phobia. What a terrible condition to suffer from. It doesn't sound healthy at all. But in order for us to seriously consider this demand to fear God, we need to carefully consider what the word means and, very significantly, how the word is employed in the Bible. In what sense is the word fear employed in the Bible? And I would suggest that the word fear is used in the Bible in two senses. No doubt we could multiply that, but in two big ways, each one with its subdivisions, I imagine, but two primary ways in which the word fear is employed in the Bible. And let's just notice what they are. And having done that, we can then take things forward.

[8 : 47] First of all, the word fear is used in the sense of terror or dread. We fear something that is terrifying. Curiously, it's often used with this meaning when God's people are being encouraged not to fear.

How often do we encounter in the Bible the words, fear not? For long enough, I thought that's the only word that angels knew. That's all they ever seem to say, fear not, fear not. It is a recurrent theme in the Bible, God's people being encouraged to not fear. We can think of examples, we could multiply the examples, time doesn't allow us, but we remember when God, through the prophet Isaiah, calls on His people as they're hemmed in by ferocious enemies. And what does God say to them?

Fear not, for I am with you. Or remember when the disciples saw Jesus walking on water in the darkness of the darkness of the night, and they didn't know who it was, they were terrified. And what does Jesus say to them? To this terrified band of disciples? Take courage, it is I. Don't be afraid. So fear in that sense, a sense of terror, a sense of dread. Now, a connected way in which fear is spoken of is spoken of in the Bible with this first sense of dread or terror, and often spoken of in the Bible, is in the context of disobedience and the fear of consequent punishment. And so the Bible speaks of how when we disobey God, it is right and proper, we might say even natural, that there should be that sense of dread and fear as we anticipate the consequent punishment for our disobedience.

Now, fear as dread, fear as terror, is a feature of a fallen world. In the examples we gave, there was the fear of ferocious enemies. There would be no enemies in a world without sin. The fear of what we sense as dangerous or threatening, the fear that is born of anticipating deserved punishment. Such fear would be absent in a world without sin. That's the first sense in which the word fear is used in the Bible, but it's also used in a second sense. And we might describe it in this way, fear as awe or reverence or deep respect. Now, in respect of God, this is what is experienced by those who appreciate in whose presence they find themselves. We fear the one who, because of who he is and what he is like, generates such a response in us. Now, this fear in the sense of awe, deep respect, reverence, is particularly appropriate in respect in respect of God and our relationship to God. But this sense of the word can also apply to a lesser degree in other relationships. For example, and we find this in the Bible, in the relationship of children to their parents, it is appropriate that there should be, in some degree, fear in this sense of reverence and deep respect for those God has placed over them.

[12 : 24] This fear has nothing to do with sin. This fear can be found in a sinless environment being experienced by sinless creatures. If we turn again to the book of Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 6 and verses 1 to 3, the occasion of Isaiah's commission. Just listen to what we read in the first verses of this chapter.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him were seraphs, sinless creatures, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying, and they were calling to one another, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of His glory. At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke. And then it goes on to Isaiah's response. But here we have the angels, and they fear God. They're sinless creatures, but they fear God as they appreciate, as they consider something of His majesty and His glory, of His untainted perfection. But perhaps most strikingly, we can consider how the same prophet Isaiah describes someone who feared God. Someone who feared God. Now, who is that someone? Turn with me to Isaiah chapter 11 and verses 2 and 3. Let's read from verse 1.

Isaiah chapter 11, verses 1 to 3. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. From his roots a branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. And he, this someone, he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

Now, who is this someone? Well, this is the promised Messiah. This speaks of Jesus. Jesus Himself identified this as speaking of Himself. And what does it say? Very strikingly, concerning Jesus.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. Now, this description, and no doubt much more could be said, but this description of these two types of fear, or the two ways in which the word is used in the Bible, leads us to the question that we need to grapple with this morning. In what sense is it being used by Peter when he exhorts us to fear God?

[15:16] Now, I think we often quickly, I think way too quickly, conclude that it is in the second sense, and only in the second sense, that we are to fear God. In the sense of awe and reverence and deep respect.

But is that the case? I'd argue that we are to fear God in both senses in which the word is used. Now, can that be right? Are we really, as believers, in any way to dread God? Has a sense of dread of God any place in the experience of Christians? Well, it really boils down to whether we have reason to fear or dread God in this way. If we have reason to, then we ought to. Think about Adam. Let's go way back to the beginning, back to the Garden of Eden. Adam did not fear God in this way, in the sense of dread or terror, before the fall. He feared God in the sense of awe and reverence and respect, but he did not fear God in the sense of dreading God. He had no reason to. There was no reason for Adam to dread God. But he did dread God after he sinned. His first words to God following his disobedience. What were they? I was afraid. I was afraid. Ought Adam to have been afraid? Absolutely.

He had every reason to be afraid of God in this sense, given that he had rebelled against God. One writer expresses the matter very clearly. It is the essence of impiety not to be afraid of God when there is reason to be afraid. For those who maybe are still to be persuaded, listen to Jesus as he echoes this very sentiment in instructions that he gave to his disciples in the Gospels, as he gathered his disciples together and gave them instructions as they were being sent out two by two. What did he say to them? He said this, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul? And remember, he's speaking to his disciples here. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Jesus seems to think that there is a place for this kind of fear, even in the experience of the Hebrews. It is, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But if we recognize that this is valid, that in the experience of the believer, there ought to be in some measure this sense of fear. If we accept that, it is important to consider what we are to do when, with good reason, we have cause to be afraid of God because of our disobedience. Now, what is our natural reflex when we are afraid? Let's take it out of the religious sphere, just in life generally. What is your natural reflex when you're afraid? What do you do?

[18:54] What do you do? You run away, don't you? When you're afraid, you run away from that which is causing you to fear. That's the natural reflex, to run away. But if you have reason to fear God because you have disobeyed God, listen well and listen clear. What I would urge you to do is don't do what your natural reflex would have you do, which is run away. Rather, run to God. Run to God who is able and willing to forgive you, and as He forgives you, so He removes the cause of your fear, of your legitimate dread and terror in the face of the God that you have rebelled against.

Don't run away from Him. Run to Him, the one who is altogether gracious and merciful and loving and forgiving, and as you run to Him in your fear, so experience the forgiveness that He will grant to you on the grounds of what His Son Jesus has done for you in your place, dying on Calvary's tree. So, it can be appropriate for us, as Christians, to fear God in the first sense of the word. But having said that, having recognized that, we do stress that it is in the second sense of the word that we have the principle, the permanent sense in which we are to fear God. That sense of awe and reverence and deep respect, this is at the heart of the matter concerning our obligation to fear God. We are to fear God in the manner that Jesus is described as delighting in the fear of God. We are to fear God as the sinless angels who are witnesses to His majesty and glory and untainted perfection. This fear of God is grounded in the conception we entertain of God, and is the attitude of heart and mind that flows from that conception. Now, let me illustrate what I mean by that. If your conception of God is of a Father

Christmas-like figure in the sky, or maybe some benevolent grandfather figure way up there, if that is how you conceive of God, then you will not fear Him. Well, of course you won't fear Him. What's to fear?

If that is your conception of God, of course you don't fear Him. It would be folly to fear such a figure. But if your conception of God is aligned with the revelation of God by God found in the Bible, then you can do no other than fear Him. You see, the only conception of God that is worth having is God's own conception of Himself, which He reveals to us in the Scriptures. And if that is your conception of God, then I repeat, you can do no other than fear such a God. You see, the bottom line is this. If you don't fear God, it can only be because you don't know God. Because if you know God, then you can do no other than fear God.

If you don't fear God as you ought, it might not mean that you know nothing of God or do not know Him in any way, but your knowledge of Him is partial and defective.

Let me quickly just answer a question as we move on. Does it matter? It doesn't matter. It doesn't make any practical difference in our lives that we fear God, in both ways described, and very particularly in that sense of reverence and deep respect. Does it make any difference?

[23 : 00] Well, let's just notice some consequences of fearing God that will lead us into considering the subsequent duties much more briefly. What consequences flow from fearing God?

One interesting consequence, I don't know if it's an interesting consequence, but one necessary consequence of fearing God is obedience to God. Now, that could be illustrated in a multiplicity of ways from the Bible, but let me just remind you of one occasion. We won't even look up the passage.

Let me just describe it to you and remind you if you're familiar with the occasion. Remember when Abraham, when Abraham was traveling and he arrived in the Negev, and he was with his wife, Sarah, and she was very beautiful, and he was concerned that Abimelech, the king of Gerar, would want to take Sarah for himself. And so what did Abraham do very foolishly? He lied. He said, no, she's my sister.

And he thought in that way he would be spared the death that would follow from the king wanting Sarah for himself. So he lied. And of course, the king, oblivious to the reality of the situation, did indeed fix his eyes on Sarah, and he took her to be his own woman. Now, God did not allow that union to be consummated, but that was certainly the king's intention. When the king discovered the truth of the matter, and he protests to Abraham, why did you do this? Why did you lie? Why did you say that she was your sister when she was actually your wife? Why did you do this? What did Abraham say?

Abraham said, I was sure that you would kill me because there is no fear of God in this place. Now, Abraham underestimated God's common grace in restraining the king, and indeed in granting the king a measure of decency in his dealings. But it's interesting, the argument, the principle that he established. He says, given there's no fear of God, then anything can happen. Given that there's no fear of God in this place, how can I hope or imagine that there will be obedience to God?

[25 : 13] Because obedience to God flows from the fear of God. And that is surely true in our own lives. In the measure that we fear God, in that measure, we will obey God. Fear of God leads, and this is really another way of saying the same thing. It leads to a hatred of sin. In Proverbs chapter 8 and verse 13, the fear of the Lord is actually described in that way. To fear the Lord is to hate evil.

One and the same thing, almost, the manner in which it's described. To fear the Lord is to hate evil. The fear of the Lord leads also to respect for others. It's interesting that in the Mosaic Law, when

you go into the details of it, and you're being given instructions as to how to treat the disabled in Leviticus chapter 19, and there's clear instructions on how to treat humanely and lovingly and in a caring way those who are disabled. And what does God say? That this is the fear of God. Those who fear God will treat others with due respect. So, you can see the ripple effect of feeding God. So, it is no surprise to read the words of the preacher in Ecclesiastes that we have already read. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. So, I hope you can appreciate how feeding God is the necessary foundation for the other duties, which we will now consider much more briefly.

Love the brethren. Love the brotherhood of believers. What does this mean? I guess there are two matters that we need to grapple with, an understanding of who are the brotherhood, and an appreciation of what it means to love them. The who and the what. First of all, the who.

Now, this seems simple enough. We are to love fellow believers in a particular way. Not in an exclusive way. It's not that we only love fellow believers, but there is a particular way in which we are to love fellow believers. But we do need to have a broad and globally encompassing vision when considering who our fellow believers are. We can consider at least three circles. Maybe multiply or have more circles. But let's think of three fellow believers in our own local congregation or fellowship. Fellow believers in the locality or city where God has placed us. Fellow believers in other countries and continents. We are to love the brotherhood of believers. We are to love them all. That's the who.

[27 : 54] What about the what? What is involved in loving the brotherhood? Do we satisfy this demand by feeling some sense of affection for fellow believers? I wasn't taught much grammar at school. It wasn't in vogue to teach grammar when I was at school. That's my excuse anyway. But I do remember one thing I was taught concerning verbs. A verb is a doing word. I don't even know if that's a very accurate or certainly a full definition, but I remember it. A verb is a doing word. Now, this is certainly true of the verb to love as found in this demand. Love is a doing word. Now, I'm not going to tell you this morning what you must do to demonstrate the genuineness of your love, but I will pose you a question that can be asked in relation to the three circles mentioned just a moment ago. Have you, in this week that has concluded, have you loved the brethren or any member of the fellowship of this congregation?

Have you? In what way have you done that? Have you loved the brotherhood, the brethren in the city of Aberdeen, where God has placed you? Have you loved the brethren across the world? Now, as we go from one circle to another, you start saying, well, that's actually very difficult. How am I supposed to do that? And I'm not saying that it's easy. These are tough questions. How can we, to just throw out one quandary, how can we love our brethren in Somalia and Eritrea whose circumstances are so desperate that they will cross the Sahara only to fall prey to those who would send them to their death in the unforgiving waters of the Mediterranean? How do we love our brethren in these lands? Now, I don't have easy answers, but love asks the difficult questions, and love will not rest until it finds answers.

Fear God. Love the brethren. We move on. Show proper respect to everyone. Or, in the very succinct way in which Peter puts it, honor everyone. Honor everyone. Again, I return to what I said as we began. If only we listen to God, wouldn't the world be so different if we honored everyone, if we respected everyone, if we were courteous to everyone, it really would be a very different world. Just imagine such a world, such a city, a workplace, a church, a family. Think of your own family. For we all lived under this motto, honor everyone. Irritating little brothers, bullying big brothers, overbearing parents, disobedient children. Yes, that's the world we live in. But what does God say? Honor everyone. Show proper respect to everyone. In such a world, there would be no racism, no sectarianism, no homophobia, no persecution, no injustice, no bullying, no teasing. I could go on. But take it to a simpler, earthy level.

What if we really did in our everyday walk honor everyone? What if we treated everyone with courtesy and respect? The bus driver, the lady at the till at Tesco, the difficult colleague, the annoying parent, the irritating child, the surly shop assistant, and we could go on. Honor everyone. Honor everyone.

Now again, and I've said this already, but again, this maybe all sounds very utopic, but as Christians, we must examine ourselves. Do you honor everyone? Do you honor and respect and treat with courtesy and consideration those you disagree with? Those we as Christians disagree with, perhaps vigorously, or perhaps those we simply don't understand. Militant secularists, the

adherents of other religions, gay activists, loud teenagers, and so we could go on.

[32 : 13] Honor everyone. There is no conscience clause in this demand. It doesn't say honor everyone except, and then this long list of people, well, I'm certainly not going to honor them.

I'm certainly not going to respect them. I'm certainly not going to treat them with courtesy, not them. Now, we do need to be clear. To honor or respect someone does not mean that we need to agree with what they think. It does not mean that we need to approve of the way they live, by no means. But we honor them as those made in the image and likeness of God.

There are no exceptions. Show proper respect to everyone. And finally, the fourth duty that we have here in this verse, honor the king. This is possibly something, or there is possibly, sorry, something just a little polemic, maybe even mischievous in the manner that Peter includes the duty to honor the king and how he deliberately employs the same verb to honor for a second time. Now, I say why this might be thought a little mischievous or a little polemic, but why do I say that? It may seem a strange thing to say. He's using the same verb that he has used with regard to our duty to everyone. Slaves, the poorest of the poor, the lowest of the low, you've got to honor them. And then he comes to the king, and he comes to the emperor, and what does he say? Does the emperor get a better verb? No. Honor the king. Honor the king.

Yes, you have to honor him. However despotic he is, however unjust he is, however incompetent he is, you have to honor him. But you don't have to do more than honor him. The attitude you should have to him isn't to be any greater than it is to the humblest citizen. Honor everyone. Honor the king.

The king has given no superior place to the slave. Also, we're not required to love the king, and we're certainly not to fear the king. We are to honor the king. Now, again, all the implications of that could be developed. We did touch on it a little a couple of weeks ago, so we will leave it there.

[34 : 34] Four duties that God places upon us, very particularly as Christians. Fear God. Love the brethren. Honor everyone. Honor the king. If only we listened. Let's pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen.