

## **“God and Government”**

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Scriptural Foundation: 1 Peter 2:13-17, ESV

### Submission to Authority

<sup>13</sup> Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, <sup>14</sup> or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. <sup>15</sup> For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. <sup>16</sup> Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. <sup>17</sup> Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

How do you feel about your government? If you are like most of your fellow countrymen, you are not very happy with it. According to the latest Gallup poll, the president's approval rating has dropped to 40% this week, a near low. Congress fares worse. An AP<sup>1</sup> survey conducted last week found American's approval of Congress has dropped to its lowest level yet: 12% of Americans consider Congress with approval. Ironically, both Democrats and Republicans are angry with government, yet for, seemingly, polar opposite reasons. One party is upset that government control is expanding its involvement beyond healthy limits and the other party is upset that government is not expanding quickly or broadly enough.

While I have strong interests in the political workings of our nation's leadership, my intention is not to debate from the pulpit which party has the best ideas. As an aside, I am happy to discuss these matters over coffee sometime. On many occasions, my friends and I have had vigorous conversations in which we have worked out the multi-faceted problems of, not only our nation, but of the entire world! Have you had these kinds of discussions with your friends, also? Unfortunately, to date, the president has not yet phoned me to discover our solutions to these problems.

Our goal in this study is to discover together the Christian response to human government and the response we can have which would best glorify God. God's reputation in this world has been Peter's concern through this second chapter of this letter. It wants it to be our central concern as well. Our overriding priority and purpose is to wake up in the morning and think about life this way: What will glorify God? That is central, fundamental, and foundational and that is what Peter is driving us toward.

Peter urges believers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century who are enduring persecution for their faith to live their lives honorably so the unbelieving world which hates them would have to acknowledge, as a result of the honorable way they live, the nobility of God and God is a noble God. In 1 Peter 2, Peter exhorts us this way,

<sup>12</sup> Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

The reader asks, upon reading Verse 12, what specifically does it mean to “keep our conduct among the Gentiles honorable”? The use of the word “Gentiles” speaks of unbelievers. What does it mean to live in such a way and conduct ourselves in such a way we would live honorably? Peter applies this principle to three broad areas of life, the first we will discuss in this study, and that is to say, the way we conduct ourselves in response to human government, Verses 13 through 17. Then Peter will talk about conducting ourselves honorably in the way we respond in the marketplace, to our employers, and that will be Verses 18 through 25. In Chapter 3, Verses 1 through 8, Peter is going to tell us to conduct ourselves honorably among the Gentiles in the way we live within our family: in the way we treat our spouse, our husband or our wife.

Each of these areas possesses great potential for us to shine the bright light upon God's beauty, or, also, each has the potential for us to throw a dark curtain over the glory of God so it is harder for the world to see Him. As we study each of these sections, it is vital we understand Peter's overriding concern as to how we interact with the government,

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press

with our employer, and with our spouses, not for the purposes of self-satisfaction or for the sake of self-advancement. That is not how we are to think about these areas, “What is going to be best for me?” but to interact with each of these areas with the thought, “What is going to be best for God’s name and what will advance Jesus’ name in this world?” When we think about how we respond to human government, in our workplace, and in our family, the first concern we have as a Christian is: I want to respond in such a way that unbelievers, as they look at me and see me close up, they are to look at me and say, ‘That person has a noble God! That person’s God is praise-worthy.’”

Peter knows our eternal joy is tied to our pursuit of the glory of God. Do we think of our life this way? Is that really the way we think, and is that what motivates us? Peter knows our flesh’s default motivation in our relationships in these areas revolves around self. He knows we need encouragement to hold onto this vertical and eternal perspective about life. Pursuing the advance of our own glory will ultimately rob us of glory because it disconnects us from the God of glory. God calls us to live different kinds of life with His glory constantly in view, for our glory and for the sake of His name.

Does your life promote God’s reputation or does it undermine it? As unbelievers look at you and your life and the way you respond to human government, to your employer, and to your spouse do they praise God and glorify God or do they see God in a lesser light? We want to think about that question in this study in our response to human government. The main idea in our text is: God calls us to respond to civil government in such a way our life testifies to the grace and greatness of God. Our lives are the greatest defense of the Gospel we proclaim and the question before us is: What kind of citizens are we, as Christians, to be in this world? Does it really matter the manner in which we interact with human government?

There is much confusion in this matter in the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Many evangelicals believe it to be wrong to speak boldly about political issues for fear the cross of Christ will become entangled with the flag. Others become so embroiled in politics, the main message of their lives is a political platform rather than the Gospel.

We will not answer all the questions related to God and government in this study, but let us dig into these verses to find out more of God’s will for our lives. There are four parts to this study. The first is God’s establishment of civil government. The second is God’s design for civil government. The third is God’s commandment to His people in response to civil government. The fourth is God’s purpose for our submissive response to civil government.

Let’s consider God’s establishment of civil government,

<sup>13</sup> Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, <sup>14</sup> or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

Here God calls our nation’s government a “human institution” yet Peter will call us to honor, acknowledge, and submit to this government for the Lord’s sake. Why should we not just ignore it? If it is just a human institution, why do we deal with it at all? While human government is a human institution, it is not a human invention. God invented the government; He is the One who established it and designed it. We do not read that in 1 Peter and that is the reason we turn to Romans 13. One principle of Scripture is: Scripture interprets Scripture. As we study the Bible, we want to understand the way we can understand more of the Bible is by allowing the lens of other Scripture to look at other passages. This is particularly true of the passage before us.

In Romans 13, the Apostle Paul is dealing with this same issue, but he speaks more fully of the idea of the establishment of human government, and we read,

<sup>1</sup> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

The principle Paul lays out is: God sovereignly establishes all human government and every human leader for His specific, good, kind, and gracious purposes, but take note of the exclusive, all-encompassing description the Bible uses to describe God’s establishment of human government: Let every person be subject. It is not just some of the people, not just the people who voted for the person who happens to be in office, but it includes those who did not

vote for that particular leadership. Every Christian must be subject. The Paul adds: No authority except from God. It is not just the wise, good, and godly leaders who have been established by God, but even the wicked, foolish, and arrogant leaders have been established by God.

Think through some of the wicked and arrogant leaders Scripture talks about. There is Pharaoh in Egypt's day who murdered baby boys being born to Hebrew women. That is what he established and the edict he sent out. We think of King Ahab in Israel and how wicked he was in his idolatry and sexual immorality. We think of Herod, in Jesus' day, who had all the little boys under the age of two slaughtered for the sake of his fear of this "King" who was reported to have come. Peter is writing in Nero's day, the emperor who burned like candles in his garden.

In modern times, the murderers Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler, and Saddam Hussein come to mind. There are so many more, yet the Bible teaches us God establishes each one for His good, kind, and sovereign purposes as He is moving history along a path to the Day of the Lord when His Son Jesus is exalted. God is not the author of evil. He is not responsible for the evil these kinds of leaders unleash upon mankind, but the power of government every human leader wields is derived from God.

Human leaders will stand before God someday to give an account of the way they used the authority God gave to them. One day God will judge the nations and the governments<sup>2</sup> for their wickedness, but we keep in mind, while God establishes human governments, human authority is not ultimate. Only God's sovereign authority is ultimate. Listen to what Daniel wrote,

2:20 Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. <sup>21</sup> He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings..."

Daniel was living in King Nebuchadnezzar's reign and he acknowledged God is the One who sets up kings and He is the One who removes Kings. Proverbs 8:25 says, "By me kings reign." Remember Jesus' interaction with Pontus Pilate during the trial. Pontus Pilate was becoming very frustrated Jesus was not answering him, and we read in John 19,

<sup>10</sup> So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" <sup>11</sup> Jesus answered him, "*You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.*"

Pontus Pilate was placed there by God and given the specific, sovereign authority for God's kind purposes, even in the most wicked act of all Creation, the crucifixion of the Son of God. The emphasis in Scripture is upon God's sovereign working in the affairs of human government to complete His ultimate purpose.

I love the hymn which reminds us, as believers, of the nature of God working in this world,

This is my Father's world.  
O let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the ruler yet.<sup>3</sup>

We do not always understand the wise workings of God, nor do we always approve of it. It is not the way we would do them, but Isaiah the Prophet reminds us, in Isaiah 55

<sup>8</sup> For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. <sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The principle is: God establishes human government. That is a key cornerstone upon which we place our thinking regarding our response to human government.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:31a

<sup>3</sup> "This Is My Father's World," Maltbie D. Babcock, 1858-1901, Verse 3.

What is God's design for civil government? We read from our text,

<sup>14</sup> ...or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

God did not design government to take personal responsibility and freedom away from its citizens. The Bible communicates a limited intention for human government. God sums up His purposes for human government with these two statements: To punish those who do evil; and to praise those who do good. That is the role God has established government to hold. They do not always keep within those limits, but that is what God intended.

Peter emphasizes the government's responsibility to punish those who do wrong, to punish evil doers. This includes, I believe, both criminals who reside inside a nation's borders as well as enemies who would harm people from outside the nation's borders. A good government is one which grabs hold of its God-given role, to punish evil doers and imprison criminals, and at times to make war against people such as Adolph Hitler during the 1940's.

Peter then emphasizes the positive nature of government, and that is "to praise those who do good", to promote the general welfare of a people by encouraging behavior in them and among them which advances peace, kindness, love, and unity. One way our government encourages good behavior is by giving tax credits when one contributes to charitable organizations. The original thinking behind this was the government saying, "We want to praise, encourage, and reward those voluntarily give of their resources to support the poor and those who are weak among us, to support education for children so they will be taught moral and spiritual values." We are going to give praise to those who do good and that is a right and good role government would have.

Peter summarizes the role of government in this two-fold fashion: To punish those who do evil, and reward those who do good. Paul agrees with this, although Paul focus is upon the punishment aspect, however, in Romans 13,

<sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

I believe that the "sword" refers specifically to capital punishment and any punishment government deems a right response to evil which is painful. Government is set in place to punish those who do evil, and this is not our personal responsibility when we see someone doing something wrong and we attempt to punish them; that is not our role. That is why Jesus says to turn the other cheek<sup>4</sup> in reference to personal ethics. It is the responsibility of government and how awful it would be if government backs away from that rightful role of punishing evil doers. Evil would flourish. Human government is a huge blessing from God in this fallen and sinful world. It is His common grace He gives to us.

Recently I read a story of the plight Mexico is enduring. The government seemingly cannot restrain the evil and it cannot punish the evil doers related to the drug cartels. As many as forty thousand people have perished by murder from these drug cartels in the last five years. It has become so bad, the government has asked, "What is the answer?" The ex-President Vicente Fox suggested the Mexican government consider calling on the drug cartels for a truce and offering them amnesty and basically waving the white flag, saying, "We surrender. We just do not want you to kill anymore. We will not punish you for killing forty thousand people. We surrender!" How horrible is that kind of environment to be in when the government becomes so weak and so unwilling to punish wrong-doers and evil absolutely controls our environment.

I am thankful for the government of this country. As flawed as it is, I am thankful when I pick up the phone and call "911", I get hold of police officers or the fire department. I am thankful gangs do not rule all of the streets. I am thankful when I put my head to rest on my bed at night I do not have to fear listening for planes flying overhead which would be enemy planes ready to drop bombs on me.

Have we thanked God for our government lately? Twelve percent do not approve, but have we thanked God because it is a blessing and a gift from Him. Let us not forget that.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:39

I wish our government would understand the limited role God designed for her. I believe our nation's founders certainly understood that, because they wrote in the Constitution, "We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity..." The Preamble to the Constitution is basically saying and expanding upon what Peter is saying, "Punish those who do evil; praise those who do good." That is the role of government.

As far afield as we are, I still thank God for His kind provision for us. This leads us to the commandment God gives to His people in response to human government,

<sup>13</sup> Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, <sup>14</sup> or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. <sup>15</sup> For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

"Be subject" is a strong word, and it is a military word, used to describe the response of a soldier to his commanding officer, "Yes, sir!" It is a response of submission and a response of obedience and placing oneself under the authority. "Ignorance" is willful ignorance and not unknowing ignorance, and we should silence those who are hostile to the faith. God urges believers to engage ourselves with civil authority with a right, good, active, and respectful manner by submitting to human government.

Peter is arguing God's reputation is at stake. It is not about our own personal advancement and happiness and what will be better for us in the long run. That is not our primary concern. Our primary concern is we would look back, at the end of our lives, and say, "I glorified God with my life!" The way we respond to human government must have that as front and center. Peter is arguing God's reputation among unbelievers will not be advanced if we become obstinate, disobedient, and an unruly people. The state is given the authority by God to make certain demands upon our lives and we are responsible to be the very best of citizens.

Our flesh does not often like commands like these. When we feel wronged or abused by civil authority, our flesh wants to rise up in hostile, angry, embittered protest. This does not advance the glory of God in our midst. On this point, Paul affirms our response of submission in Romans 13,

<sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

The human authorities are "ministers of God". Who are these governing authorities to whom we are to subject and submit ourselves? In the United States the king is not law, the law is king and I am thankful for our Constitution because it is our recognized government authority. In the United States the President does not possess the civil authority an emperor in Rome did, such as Peter was experiencing. There are differences of application, but the principle is still the same: All three branches of our nation's government possess legal limitations of their power, but understand, they do possess authority to which we are to submit and to which we are to respond respectively, honorably, and joyfully.

God commands us to respond in submission to these civil authorities, but understand it is much harder for the people to whom Peter is writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century to obey this command than it is for us. The authority to which they had to submit was much more expansive: The emperor was law and whatever he said was law. They were much viler, yet Peter says to be subject because this is the will of God and this is the way they glorified God in their lives.

Notice in Verse 13, Peter says, "...to every human institution." This includes the President, Congress, judges, police officers, TSA agents<sup>5</sup>, FBI agents<sup>6</sup>, civil counsels, school boards, and teachers. All those who possess civil authority are vested by God with that authority and Paul tells us they are ministers of God.

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<sup>5</sup> Transportation Safety Administration

<sup>6</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation

There are many questions Peter does not answer for us in this study. Should we, as civilians, criticize our government? Is it right to disobey human authority? Are there limits to what we must submit? The short answer is, “Yes, there are limits to civil authority,” but we, first, want to make sure this general rule, the main-driving point Peter is encouraging us with, is driven home firmly in our soul: God receives glory when we submit to civil government. This must become the demeanor and the direction of our lives or we will fail in our ultimate purpose as believers.

There are three practical implications which flow from the call to submit, or be subject, to human authority. First, pay your taxes! The Apostle Paul makes this application so that is why it is important for us to make this application as well. Evidently, believers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century did not like to pay their taxes either. That is the reason Paul had to spend so much time talking about it. Taxes are not voluntary contributions, contrary to what some politicians assert. Taxes are legal obligations. For the believer, taxes become a test of spiritual integrity. To refuse to pay taxes is not only a crime against our government, but it is a sin against God. That is the teaching of Scripture.

I appreciate what Chief Justice William Howard Taft had to say on this matter: “It is the duty of every citizen to avoid payment of all taxes and to evade payment of none.” Do you catch the difference? In other words, if one can legally avoid paying taxes, do it. That would be a good thing, but do not disobey the law as one pays taxes. Jesus would say, in Matthew 22,

<sup>21</sup> *“Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”*

This was in direct response to a question regarding paying taxes.

The second application is for us to be an influence for good in our community,

<sup>15</sup> For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

It is important for us, as believers, while we are exiled and foreigners, strangers in this world, not to detach ourselves from this world and not to isolate ourselves, but rather to do good in the context of community. Look for ways which would benefit your neighborhood, school district, and community which would cause the society around you to be healthier, happier, and more beautiful because you live in it.

It is a convicting question to ask ourselves, “Is my neighborhood better, happier, healthy, and more beautiful because I live in it? If I moved away from this neighborhood, would this neighborhood suffer some negation and would there be something missing?” Those are questions each of us should ask ourselves, because by doing good that is the way we promote the glory of God.

The third application is: obey the laws. We must not arbitrarily pick and choose for ourselves which laws we will obey and which laws we choose not to obey. If the zoning code requires an expensive permit before we modify the deck at the back of our home, get the permit Scripture would say. If the state requires home-schoolers to register their child with the state in order to home-school the child, register the child. If the law requires teenagers to be in school on “Senior Skip Day”, be in school and parents, do not write a note to make an excuse for your senior on that day. That is what it means to obey the law. It does not mean we must agree with those laws; it means God calls us to obey them. Why would we do that? We do this for the glory of God and for His reputation.

There is nothing wrong in working to change laws and there is everything right about that, but as a people, we are to submit to human laws as sent to us from God for His kind purposes. Some may protest, “Man’s laws are not God’s laws. I am not even a citizen of this world. This world is not my home and I am not ultimately answerable to a human institution. I am answerable to God. I am free from this world and from its foolishness.” All that is true and you will have no argument from me with those statements. You are free from the shackles of this world and its whole, rotten system, but what does God say with regard to the application of your freedom,

<sup>16</sup> Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

We are to honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, and honor the emperor. The life of the Christian is one of freedom. We are free from the guilt of sin and we are free from future condemnation some would bring against us. We will never have to fear standing before God to give an account of our guilty acts, attitudes, thoughts, and words. God has liberated us and set us free from that. We are free to enjoy God. We are free to worship Him. We are free from spiritual ignorance to know God. We are free from enslavement to sin.

Are you free today? Have you experienced that freedom in Christ? God tells us, "The one whom the Son sets free is free indeed." Have you been made free in Jesus Christ? That kind of freedom can only come to one who comes to Jesus Christ and says, "Christ, I am a sinner. I need your Gospel. I need your life. I need your work to be applied to my life personally and I receive Jesus as my Savior and Lord." Then the soul becomes liberated. Are you free? If you say, "Yes, I am free," then let us live as free, not using our freedom as a covering for evil, but let us live as servants of the Living God.

The last application is God's purpose for our submissive response to civil government,

<sup>15</sup> For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

Foolish people are people who are mocking God, mocking the Gospel, and mocking God's people. The principle is: Godly conduct is the greatest apologetic, the greatest defense, and greatest demonstration of the goodness of God and the goodness of His Gospel. Christians in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century were accused of many wrongs, of insurrection against the Roman government, of cannibalism because at communion they were said to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ; of being disloyal to Rome because they refused to bow their knee and worship Caesar as everyone else did, of killing their children and eating their flesh, of gross sexual immorality even by an immoral world because Christian men were overheard calling Christian women, "Sister" and they thought there was some kind of sexual connotation to that. There were all kinds of slanderous accusations made against the people of Jesus' time.

What is the solution to this huge public relations problem? Here is the upstart church and now there are all of these hostile rumors coming against them, "Who is going to go there?" What are we going to do to change the perception this world has for us? How about taking out billboards all around the city and promote how "good" we are? How about getting on a talk show and arguing with the host about his wrong perceptions? Peter's response is: Start living your lives in grace and goodness and kindness and gentleness. Start living out the fruit of the Spirit: Love and joy and peace and patience and self-control.

I understand there is much to be upset about regarding the direction of our nation. I am deeply concerned. I fight this temptation, also, but God's glory becomes my first passion when I commit my life to Christ. I know God is most glorified in me, not when I am angry and hostile, but when I am gracious and peaceful and doing God's work. That is not to say there is nothing to be angry about, but it is to say the demeanor of our life is we do not become hostile people. It is not as though there are no fights to fight in a culture which is moving away from life and from liberty, but we do it with joy in our hearts, with peace and patience and love.

Is it right for a Christian to criticize our leaders? Yes, particularly in America. That is what good citizenship requires us to do. It would be wrong not to criticize if leaders are moving away from righteousness. That is what the Constitution provides for us as good citizenship. Sometimes criticism and confrontation are absolutely necessary. It always is so under every form of government, and particularly in our own.

If we read the Bible and what John the Baptist did talking about Herod and his marrying his brother's wife. That is why he was beheaded. We think of Samuel confronting King Saul for his sinful sacrifice.

We must be careful to avoid contemptuous language, because criticism can become contempt fairly easily in our flesh, but we are called, as Peter will say, to honor the emperor. As we criticize, we must criticize with Scripture in view, in peace, in the strength of the Lord, and with intercession, praying for the leaders we are criticizing.

Secondly, is it right to disobey my government? The answer Scripture gives is: Sometimes. We must be very careful because there are only two situations in which we are called to disobey our government and we must be very careful. The first is if our government commands us to do something God commands us not to do.

Pharaoh says to the midwives, “Kill all of the first-born sons of the Hebrew women.” If you are a godly Hebrew midwife, or a godly midwife, you will have to say, “No, I cannot do that. I may lose my life for it, but I cannot do something which God commands me not to do.” There are some believers, and I believe there will be a time in our country, if our country continues to move this way, who think many of us will have to take a stand. Pastors may be some of the first ones as to what we can and cannot say.

The second situation is when our government forbids us to do something God absolutely commands us to do. Peter was in the same situation in Acts 4 and 5, when this human authority told him, “Do not preach in the name of Jesus.” Peter’s response was, “I have to obey God rather than man,” and he continued to preach even though the human government told him not to preach in the name of Jesus.

Whenever we must disobey human government, understand that fight is spiritual and not physical. Our weapons are spiritual: Our sword is the truth of God’s Word and that is what we will use, the most powerful weapon we possess in our entire arsenal and it is the only one to bring life out of death and we dare never to sheath this weapon.

How is God to have us related to our civil authority? His overriding concern is the glory of God. Is that your overriding concern for your life? That is where this application begins, and if we do not get to that place then nothing Peter says will help us. We must, first, get to the point where we say, “Yes, God is great and glorious and this is my one passion.” Let us pray God will give us one true and holy passion.