Obeying God's Will

Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair

1 Peter 2:11-17

Pastor Bryan Clark

It's not unusual that I'll engage people in a conversation related to God's will. People are trying to sort out, "What is God's will for me?" what we would refer to as the *mysterious will* of God. Now that's a very legitimate discussion and sometimes it's a very difficult thing to discern. But always in the midst of that discussion, I try to remind us that there *is* what we call the mysterious will of God—that's what you're searching for. But there's also what we were refer to as the *revealed will* of God, which means God's already made statements in His word, "This is My will," and it's very important when you're discerning the will of God, to first ask yourself the question, "Am I already being obedient to the *revealed will* of God?" In essence, if I'm not willing to obey what I already know is the will of God, why would God reveal more of His will to me?

So that's what we want to talk about this morning, what I would refer to as the *revealed will* of God. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Peter, Chapter 2. We're working our way through 1 Peter. Last week we reminded ourselves that we are *living stones,* being built up to a spiritual house. We're a *royal priesthood*. We're a *chosen race*. We're a *holy nation*. Once *not* the people of God, but now by the grace and mercy of God, we *are* the people of God. So then, how do we live that way? How do we live as the people of God in a culture of despair? That's where we pick it up in verse 11:

> **Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from freshly lusts which rage war against the soul.** (*NASB, 1 Peter 2:11)

Eight times in Peter's epistle—1 and 2 Peter—he will remind them that he deeply loves them. These are people he deeply cares about and has significant concerns for them **as aliens and strangers**. Again, this is how he introduced them in the very first part of chapter one—that as **aliens** they are citizens of one country but living in a different country. In this case, most of them are Jewish. They have been driven out of Palestine because of persecution. They're living in Asia Minor, northern Turkey, and as such they have very few rights or protections. So part of this is just trying to be skillful and living to stay alive. There's a fair amount of persecution. They're under Nero as the emperor. This is about to get much worse. So it would be like a Christian in maybe one of the Middle Eastern countries today. They need to be very thoughtful and skillful because their very lives are at stake. The idea of **strangers** carries more the idea of being wanderers, being pilgrims. They move from place to place; they're transient. Both words were used to describe Abraham and his family in route to the Promised Land. That's probably why Peter uses the terminology here but of course it's metaphoric in the sense that we are citizens of heaven, living out that citizenship on earth, and we need to live it out in a skillful way.

So he urges them; he pleads with them to **abstain from fleshly lusts**. Now he already brought this up in chapter one. He said that at one time there were behaviors that defined our lives simply because we were ignorant, because we were in darkness, because we didn't know any better, not necessarily referring to things that are evil so much as it is that all of us have natural longings and desires. It's kind of the outflow of being made as people in the image of God. But when God isn't in the picture, we desperately seek to satisfy those desires in ways that are contrary to the plan of God.

As it says in The Proverbs, "*There is a way that seems right but the end is devastating*," so we try to satisfy those longings and desires in all kinds of ways that ultimately are empty and futile and destructive. Now that made some degree of sense when we were ignorant, when we were in darkness, but now that we are in the light, now that we know better, then it would be very unwise to go back to those same behaviors.

Since this is the second time that Peter has brought this up, there must be some sense that the people are returning to some of their destructive ways and he's pleading with them to reconsider that. He says the issue then is that those fleshly lusts **rage war against the soul**. Peter uses the word **soul** in the sense of the whole person—the intellect, the emotions, the will—not specifically that part of us that connects with God but kind of my whole person. Basically the summary of what Peter is saying is it's going to be hard enough to live out the value system as the people of God on earth without self-destructing, without raging war against yourself. Why make it that much more difficult by making such poor choices? So that's kind of like step one. This is going to be hard enough without self-inflicted wounds. One other thing about verse 11 worth noting is the idea of **fleshly lust**s. Some of your translations have *natural desires*. It's actually an excellent translation in this context because that is what it's talking about and it's very important to see that's what Peter is saying. **Abstain** from those desires that come naturally because they rage war against your soul, because as a culture today we are very confused about this. As a matter of fact, it saddens me that so many Christians have been persuaded by this argument—the idea that if something is a *natural* desire, then that must make it morally right. As a matter of fact, some people push it so far that if something is a natural desire, than that's obviously the way God created me; therefore he would want me to pursue that desire. Peter couldn't be clearer: *Abstain from natural desires as they rage war against out souls*.

If you read Paul's argument in Romans chapter1, basically what he says is *because we have exchanged the glory of God for the glory of a creature, we have in essence decided to worship the creature rather than the creator.* It has made a mess of our natural desires. Paul, in essence says, "This is going to confuse and mess up what we naturally desire, which ultimately is a road of destruction unless we listen to what God has to say." So it's really important to understand morality— right and wrong—cannot be defined by what I naturally desire. It has to be defined on God's Word and what God says is right and wrong. Verse 11 is what *not* to do. The discussion then moves to verse 12, what we *are* to do.

> **Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe *them,* glorify God in the day of visitation.**

So we are to **keep our behavior**—the word **excellent** probably isn't the best translation there—rather *winsome or attractive.* It's the very same message we saw in Proverbs: When we obey God, we actually make the message of the gospel attractive to people that are seeking and searching. So keep your behavior attractive or winsome to the **Gentiles**, which is a reference to the unbelievers. Peter's using old covenant language: that if we as believers are people of God, everybody outside of that are the Gentiles. It's not an ethnic reference; it's a spiritual reference. *So in the thing in which they slander you, they may actually, because of your good deeds, ultimately come to Christ.*

When it says **the day of visitation**, it is possible to take that as the *day of judgment*, but almost all scholars believe in this context it's a reference to their *day of salvation*. The term is often used that way and makes the most sense here. That's how they glorify God—by ultimately coming into a

relationship with Christ. Now how do you turn a slanderer into a child of God? It's not by words. It's not by social media. It's not by blogging. It's not by winning an argument. It's by engaging in behavior around something that they themselves would say matters in order that, by our good behavior, at least some of them will come into a relationship with Christ. Nobody likes to be slandered; nobody likes to be called names. It's very common in our culture that the unbelieving world slanders Christians. That should not surprise you. The word *devil* actually means *slanderer*. We should expect that. It doesn't mean we like it but the question is still: how do we turn a slanderer into a child of God? The answer is: by doing good, by engaging in behaviors that matter to them. I've said before it's very hard to hate someone that you're sharing a cup of coffee with. There's something about that that changes the relationship. It's equally true that it's hard to continue to slander someone who has actually rolled up his or her sleeves and is engaging in something that you deeply care about. That's in essence what Peter is saying.

So then the question arises: What exactly are we talking about when we say *good behavior*? He goes on then and talks about good behavior as a *citizen*...good behavior as a *slave or a master*...good behavior as a husband or wife, and these are all things we're going to look at the next several weeks. We're going to start with the very easy, noncontroversial one, and that is submitting to the *government*. *(laughter)* So we pick it up in Verse 13. Trust me it doesn't get easier. *(laughter)*

> **Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.** (Vs. 13-14)

So the first discussion is: what does it look like to be a good citizen as part of our witness as the people of God? First of all, for some reason, we as a culture have this reaction anytime we see the word **submit,** and yet we have to recognize we submit in dozens of ways every day. Anybody that runs a business asks his/her employees to submit...anybody in the healthcare system...in the school system...in government. You can't function without some level of submission. There's an authority structure whether it's a family or a business or a government that is necessary to avoid chaos, in order to be effective. The word is actually a military term and it literally means to *arrange under*. So it's helpful to think of it that way. It's necessary in the military...in business...in a church. It's necessary in a family and it's necessary within the structures of government.

So submit yourselves **for the Lord's sake**. Basically what he is saying there is a consistent biblical message and that is: government is established by God. There is this reality that because we are sinners and our natural bent is towards selfishness and sin, that even a bad government is better than no government. History is abundantly clear on this. When there is lawlessness, when there is no government in charge, it does not turn into a utopia. It turns into law of the jungle. It is a blood bath, and everyone loses. So even in countries where there is a bad government, there is at least an authority structure that allows people to live some sort of a predictable lifestyle. Certainly a good government is better than a bad government.

We also understand there are dramatic differences between a first century Roman government and a twenty first century American government. This was under the time of Nero so it's probably helpful not to start down the path of, "Yes, but you don't know how bad our government is." Trust me! Compared to the first century Roman Empire, what we have is absolutely delightful. These were people under the bloody, immoral abuse of Rome. Nero would be the one who would ultimately execute Paul. He's the one who, shortly after Peter's letter, would execute Peter. He's the one who would up the persecution dramatically, yet there is an understanding if these people are going to

survive and have a life, they need to be skillful as citizens—in their case kind of *fly under the radar*. In our case today, we understand it's very different from that. As a matter of fact for all the complaints and frustrations we have with government, it's worth stopping and reminding ourselves that we as Americans live with a level of peace and prosperity and freedom that probably no people in the history of the world have ever known. So before we complain too much as the church, there is no question that we as the church in twenty first century America have more freedom to accomplish our mission than any church has had in the history of Christianity. One day when we stand before God, the one thing we will not be able to say is that we failed in our mission because the government wouldn't allow us to do our job. So for all the kinds of frustration and complaining, let's not forget that what we have is really quite remarkable. But it is true there are differences, and we have avenues to make changes and to voice our opinion and to have elections.

But it's also probably good to remind ourselves what we mean when we talk about *civil disobedience*. It seems there are many people today, including many Christians, who are under the impression that we have the right to civil disobedience any time we disagree with policies or decisions that are made by the government. It's important to understand that is not what Peter is saying. He's actually saying just the opposite—that we need to respect the fact that government is in place by God and as the people of God, **for the Lord's sake**, we submit to that. It means we respect that; we value that; we operate as good citizens within the system. Civil disobedience is restricted for those moments when the government requires us as Christians to do something that is immoral or offensive in the eyes of God. At that point we have to choose faithfulness to God over faithfulness to the government. But it is not an excuse to do as we please and disrespect those in authority every time there's some sort of a decision or policy that is contrary to your opinion.

It is interesting that Peter then defines the role of government. This is a consistent definition in the New Testament. The definition of government is: the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. Because of the reality of sin in the world, that authority structure is necessary to punish evil and to celebrate good. Virtually everything else that a government does is up for debate. People can argue the merits of small government and big government. Those aren't really biblical debates; those are just kind of civic debates that will be argued by people smarter than me. But, at the end of the day, this is the core purpose of government. It is correct to say that when a government reaches a point where it no longer punishes evil, as defined by God, and it no longer celebrates good, as defined by God, the government is ceasing to be what God intended the government to be. So you know the merits of big government versus small government and all those debates will go on and on again and again.

However there is a theological discussion that I think is worth thinking about. There is a theological reason why over the last decades the government in America has grown larger and larger and larger and larger. It basically goes like this: When we agree together as a people, as a community, that there is absolute truth, that there is an absolute law-giver, that there is absolute morality—we agree together on what's right and wrong—when that is true, we as a people govern ourselves, which means there is less need for so many laws and policies and regulations to govern behavior. But the more we drift from that, the more we decide there are no absolutes, there is no absolute morality—no one standard of right and wrong—*everyone's free to do what is right in his or her own eyes*. The more out-of-control we become, the worse our behavior becomes. As a result of that, there's more and more need to regulate such behavior. It is not a coincidence that as we have become more and more of a secular nation, the government has grown bigger and bigger and bigger. Why is that? There is a response to all the misbehavior in the land to manage it, to control it, to somehow bring it under control. Probably everyone here that owns a business or works in health care—in so many

areas out in the marketplace, in finance—would say you're absolutely being smothered with what seems like unlimited rules and policies and regulations. Why is that necessary? It's necessary because the further we drift from God, the more out of control we get, the more necessary it becomes for the government to try and regulate and control all the misbehavior. So stop and think about it. Why did people choose, "I want to be my own god"? Why did people choose moral relativism? Why did people want to move away from the idea that there's absolute morality and absolute truth? The answer is: they thought it would bring more freedom. Yet we are decades down that path. What we experience is not more freedom. What we are experiencing is more and more and more bondage, which is exactly what God said would happen.

There are often differences of opinion and ideas and beliefs between the generations as it relates to government, government issues, policies, politics, all of that. And that's not necessarily good or bad; it's probably to be expected. But I think it's helpful to at least regain some perspective, especially for the younger generation. If you're like millennial age on down, I'd at least like to offer some explanation for why the older generation maybe sees some of this differently. For you, millennial on down, this is the only America you've ever known. It's just normal to you. You think this is just the way it is. But you have to understand that isn't true. For those of us that are older, we have experienced a very different America, and we see how dramatically that has changed, and we grieve that our grandchildren will never know the freedoms that we knew when we were growing up as children. What to you is normal, to us is sad.

Let me just illustrate that. I actually grew up in Lincoln—just a couple of blocks from Lincoln High. When we were growing up as elementary-age children, during the summer and Saturdays it was very common that we would wake up in the morning, get on our bicycles, disappear, and we would come home at supper. We went to the zoo. We went to Antelope Park. We went to the pool...to the ball fields—we went all over. This wasn't unusual; we all did that. We all met at different places and did different things together. There was a tremendous sense of innocence and freedom. We all grew up that way—those of us that are older. Think about how dramatically that has changed. Most young parents today are appalled, they're horrified at the thought that their elementary-aged child could get on a bike and not come home until supper time. There are parents that won't let their children play alone in the front yard of their own house. We're afraid to even get in our cars and drive down the road for fear of a road-rage incident and somebody will shoot us.

I want you to stop and think about how dramatically the world has changed. Those of us that are older, we lived at a time when it wasn't like this, and we grieve how dramatically it has changed, and we grieve that our grandchildren will never know the innocence and freedom and life that we enjoyed—and that's what creates some of our frustration. That's why we see some of the politics and the choices and the government differently. Part of the problem is because of that sadness and that sorrow and that frustration, sometimes it turns into anger. It sometimes gets voiced in ways that are not helpful. It's actually rather destructive and it contributes to the problem. It's the reason why some of my generation gets kind of fixated on the news and politics and government and all that's going on. It's because there's kind of this desperate attempt to bring back the good old days, because we know a time when it was different. But sadly, our behaviors are not helpful; they actually just contribute to the problem. I think it's also necessary for our generation, people my age and older, to accept the fact that America has changed. It is not the same and it will not be the same. There's kind of this desperate attempt to hold on to—a few more elections, get the right people in place, a few changes and the good old days will be back. I have to tell you that train left the station and it is not coming back. You need to enter into that and understand America has changed, and how we go about reaching our communities has to change.

Back in the '80s there was this movement—mostly Christians—called the Moral Majority. It was highly political. There was this belief that when we get the White House and the Senate and the House that we would somehow bring back the good old days. History will show it was largely unsuccessful and disappointing. But think about even the name in those days—the Moral Majority. There was a belief that we are still a majority. "If we flex our muscles, we can make this happen." It's widely debated as to whether they were the majority then or not. But it is not debated anymore. We are not the majority. Just because people mark Christian on a census doesn't mean they're a Christian in the sense that we're talking about, when you're talking about people that believe what we're talking about in Peter—people that have been born again, people that God considers the people of God.

Most culture watchers, such as George Barna, put it at somewhere between six and ten percent, and we have to realize we're a small minority. This idea that we're going to rally the troops, we're going to flex our muscles, we're going to make this happen—like I said before—that train left the station. That will never work again. What's necessary is to rethink the strategy and the strategy is exactly what Peter is saying: We roll up our sleeves. We get involved in things in the community that the unbelieving world would say matter to them, and by our good deeds we win them over, and some of them will come to a relationship with Christ. Some of you are thinking, "I don't know; I don't know that I want to do that." Well, Verse 15:

> **For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. *Act* as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but *use it* as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.** (Vs. 15-17)

This is what we referred to as *the revealed will of God*. It simply could not be clearer: **Such is the will of God that by doing right** *and right as it's defined in this text are deeds that unbelievers can observe (Verse 12) and by observing, some of them will experience God's salvation.* They'll go from critic and slanderer to child of God. Peter reminds us that, "Yes, it is true in Christ we have been set free but we are not free to do as we please." We're not free to rebel. We are free to be a **bondslave of God**, and what God is asking is that we be good citizens by rolling up our sleeves, getting in the mix, and making a difference in the areas that unbelievers would say deeply matter to them.

Thankfully, this is something we do well as a church. Every week thousands of people disseminate out into the culture in hundreds of different ways and involve themselves in things that deeply matter to our community. If you were to poll our mayor, the police department, or leaders within our city, "What are the things that really concern you?" you would find the people of Lincoln Berean in all of those arenas, doing their best to try to make a difference. We just need to keep remembering how very important that is. The research consistently shows that most people today are just talkers. For all the social media talk, the research shows very few of them are willing to commit any time, money or energy to anything that matters. They just talk. The research also shows that those people that talk the most tend to do the least. But it also shows there is an army of people who very quietly, without applause, penetrate into our communities and involve themselves in the things that ultimately matter—as a witness to the fact that we are indeed the people of God.

So the next time that you are seeking to determine some area of your life and you're asking, "What is God's will for me?" the first question to ask is, "Am I already being obedient to the *revealed will of God*?" Because if I'm not willing to be obedient to that, why would God reveal any more? So, abstaining from freshly lust, rolling up our sleeves and making our message attractive by engaging

ourselves in behaviors that the unbelieving world would identify as good, and being good citizens by actually being part of the solution rather then part of the problem, in order that people might be attracted to the life-changing message of Jesus, that's God's will for us as the people of God!

Our Father, we celebrate this morning that we are Your people, but we remember that's not a license to do as we please. It's an invitation to be Your bondslave and to be faithful to what You've called us to do. Lord, may we be the church in this community, that by rolling up our sleeves and getting in the mix, makes a difference. Lord, may the people of this community say that Lincoln is a better place because the people of God were here. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. What does it mean to submit to governing authorities as a Christian living in America in the twenty-first century?

2. What is the best way to silence the critics of Christianity in our culture? What gives the critics more ammo for attacking?

3. What are some areas of life where you are seeking God's will right now? How can you discern God's will in those areas?

4. Is it fair to expect God to reveal His will for you in those areas if you are unwilling to obey His will that's already been revealed to you? Why or why not?

Bible Study

1. Read I Peter 2:11. Because of what's true of us as the people of God Peter urges the believers to abstain from "fleshly lusts." What does he mean by this? See also I Peter 1:14, 18. In what way do these lusts/desires wage war on our souls?

2. Many in our culture today believe that if something is a natural desire (lust), that must make it morally acceptable. Some would even say "God made me this way." How does Peter contradict that thinking? Compare Paul in Romans 1:18-25.

3. Read I Peter 2:12. In what ways are Christians slandered in our culture today? How are we to respond? What is the potential result according to the text? What does that mean for us as the church in terms of a strategy moving forward? Is doing good out in the community an option for the church or simply a necessary part of accomplishing the mission?

4. Read I Peter 2:13-17. How are Christians supposed to conduct themselves in relation to the governing authorities over us? Why is this important according to the text? How this might be applied in our culture today versus the first century Roman culture is quite different. How might this look today?

5. Does this text say we are now free in Christ to do as we please? What does it mean to be free to be a bondslave in Christ?

6. Can we ever really be free to accomplish I Peter 2:12-17 without obeying verse 11? Why or why not?

Application

1. Where do you need to start to obey God's will? Verse 11, 12 or 13-17? Step 1?

2. What are some things that might need to change for you to be obedient to God's will concerning the governing authorities over you?

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