

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
1 Peter 2:16,17

Today, for our meditation, I would like to set before us two verses from our second lesson, 1 Peter 2:16,17. Hear the word of the Lord: *“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”*

“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.” In Christ, crucified for us sinners, we who were once slaves to sin and bound by sin have been set free, not for sin, but from sin. We are no longer under the condemnation of the law, but that does not mean we toss the law away. No, we are to live as what we are in Christ: new creations, redeemed saints, and God’s own children. When we fail to live as such, we not only dishonor Christ, but we take the gospel for granted, and we put our salvation at stake. That is why forgiveness is something we must seek and receive not only once but daily, always returning to our Baptism, where we were adopted as God’s own and through which we were saved and washed with water and the Word. That is why God’s service is not designed for Pharisees to show God how awesome they are but for sinners to be reminded how awesome God is, that He has given His only-begotten into death for our life, both here and in heaven.

“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.” Christians are not permitted certain areas of their lives where this does not apply. The gospel is not a “Get out of Jail Free” card with respect to certain sins we’d rather not surrender to the Lord. Our life is not 99% Christ’s when we are Christians. No, He has died to purchase and win all of us for salvation. To allow His Word reign in less than 100% of our lives is to be less than 100% alive. A body fully intact but unwilling or unable to breathe is a dead body.

Now, don’t get me wrong. Will we ever this side of the grave be free from sin? No, but we will struggle with sin so long as we persist in the faith, and we will not give sin free reign over us, and we will not reject the Word’s admonitions and corrections when offered to us in Christian love. Can we find a pastor or a church to tell us our pet sin is fine and dandy, to tell us what we want to hear? Sure. But you can also probably find a doctor to tell you that your cancer is really rainbows and lollipops. Which doctor truly wants to heal you, to see you live? *“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”*

St. Paul then sums up the Christian life in four short sentences. First, *“Honor everyone.”* Notice, it’s not, “Honor everyone you like,” but, *“Honor everyone.”* Notice, it’s not, “Honor everyone who honors you,” but, *“Honor everyone.”* Each person you encounter in life is a person for whom Christ died. Is it right that your Lord, God of all, should be willing to stoop low for such someone and yet you should consider it beneath you to honor him or her, to see in him or her someone worth compassion, redemption, and mercy? Christ says that whatever we do for our neighbor we do for Him. Will we not honor Christ in the person of our neighbor?

Second, *“Love the brotherhood.”* The church is a family, and when it becomes a dysfunctional family, we do well all to kneel together, brother and sister, before our God and Father for the peace that comes only through forgiveness: forgiveness shown and in turn shared. The household of God is no place for petty rivalries, grudges, or judgment based on selfish pride instead of God’s Word. We are brothers, and not only brothers in word alone, but by Blood, Christ’s Blood, which the repentant together partake of in the Holy Supper.

Third, *“Fear God.”* And isn’t that the driving force behind all we say, think, and do for His glory? The fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom and the foundation of all love. It is a fear of His punishment, but also an earnest desire not to disappoint Him, not to pain Him who took such pains to rescue us. Such fear of God is not a mere product of the law, though the law with its threats should work fear. No, it is the reverence of faith that recognizes our Jesus for who He and for what He has done for us. To fear God is to be unwilling to grab on to anything else that would mean letting go of Him who through nails took hold of us, took hold of us who would never otherwise have sought His mercy or have known anything but His wrath.

Fourth, *“Honor the emperor.”* God’s will is that we be subject to those in authority over us, whether we voted for them or not, whether we like them as individuals or not, whether we like all their policies or not. Does that mean we must sit down and shut up as citizens? No, we have the right in our beloved country to speak out against injustice, to offer wisdom on policies, even with appropriate and respectful humor, should it prove effective and illustrate a reasonable point, and to strive for laws that protect lives and preserve peace. Yet we are to *“Honor the emperor,”* so to speak, that is, we are to honor those placed in positions of power over us. The early church did not lead a rebellion when persecuted by emperors for whom they did not vote. No, with prayer and obedience to God, even unto martyrdom, they in the end triumphed, not by the sword or legislation, and not by disrespectful vitriol, but by the providence and mercy of God. And through their willingness to suffer for the faith rather than to rebel against the state the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church, so that unbelieving men and women were moved by their faith and sought to learn more about it.

Jesus submitted to Pilate. Luther appeared before the Emperor in Worms, even though it might have meant burning at the stake. Should we not then honor the governing authorities under much more comfortable circumstances? The only reason the Bible ever gives us for disobeying the laws of the state is when it commands the Christian to do what God forbids or forbids what God commands. And so St. Peter writes, even as the church lives under a Roman government hostile to it, *“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”*

Why should we do all these things? Why should we *“live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God”*? And why should we *“honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor”*? Because Christ is risen, and we are not living only for this life, but in the light of the eternal life we will inherit. Christ is risen. He has broken the chains of sin and death that once held us captive, and to do anything but what St. Peter advocates here is to put those chains back on, and how foolish that would be. We are *“sojourners and exiles”* here, pilgrims on our way to the promised land. Through faith in our Lord Jesus, which is a living and active thing, we live and die not merely for this life, but for the next, for which He has lived and died for us. Amen.