



## **BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 1 Peter: Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair**

**By Pastor Bryan Clark**

**Message Title: Obeying God's Will Pt. 1**

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It's not unusual that I'll engage people in a conversation related to God's will. People are trying to sort out, you know, "What is God's will for me?" and this and that. It's 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 ourselves that there is what we call the mysterious will of God—that's what you're searching for. But there's also what we 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 us?

So that's what we want to talk about, 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? So, that's where we pick it up in verse 11:

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

Eight times in Peter's epistle—1 and 2 Peter—will he 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 kind of 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 kind of wanderers, being pilgrims. They just kind of move from place to place; they're transient. Both words were used to describe Abraham and his family en-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 talked about 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. It isn't necessarily referring to things that are evil, so much as it is 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 back 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 wage 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 waging 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 that I think is worth noting, is the idea of fleshly lusts. Some of your translations have natural desires. That actually is an excellent translation in this context, because that is what it's talking about. And it's very important to see that Peter is saying, abstain from those desires that come naturally, because they wage 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 is, that if something is a natural desire, then that must make it morally right. As a matter of fact, some people will even push it, that if something is a natural desire, then 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 because they wage war against our souls.

If you read Paul's argument in Romans chapter 1, 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 just what I naturally desire. It has to be defined on God's Word and what God says is right and wrong.

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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—the idea is winsome or attractive. It's the very same message we saw in Proverbs: that we should, 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 the people of God, everybody outside of that are the Gentiles. It's not an ethnic reference; it's a spiritual reference. So that 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 us. The word devil actually means slanderer. We should expect that. It doesn't mean we like it, but the question is: 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? So, 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 in the next several weeks. We're going to start with the very noncontroversial, easy discussion, and that is submitting to the government. (laughter) So we pick it up in Verse 13. Trust me it doesn't get easier.

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 kind of 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. And 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, and all of that.

But it's also probably good to remind ourselves what we mean when we talk about civil disobedience. It seems that 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 that we respect that; that we value that; 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.

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Arnie: Bryan, I hear what you're saying. We have to respect the government, but if you're involved, you're in for a great, big, huge fight. And a lot of times the guys you see that claim to be Christ followers down the road, you find out, oh, that was just a political stand as well. So how do we understand God's will in all of this?

Bryan: Well, it is complicated, and I think a lot of people are frustrated by it. So, a good starting place is context. So, we read it as Americans, versus somebody reads it in India or North Korea or Iran. So, the first readers were in a very abusive Roman government under Nero. So, it's helpful to think not everyone that's ever read these texts is an American. But then I think also separating out government from politics because government's huge, and all of our churches have people that serve in government roles and they do it quietly and faithfully and do a great job. But we need Christians there. Politics is what frustrates people. And I think those that get into it that are Christ followers can't fight fire with fire. They just can't or they compromise their witness.

But I also think it's helpful to remember in America, in our context, the government really is the people. And again, if we change the culture then it would change the government. I don't think it works the other way around. I don't think you change the government to change the culture. So, whose job is it to be an agent of change in the culture? Well, it's the church's job. So, we have freedom to do it. We have really no restrictions. So, if we're frustrated with the government, then let's do our job - change the people, the people will change the government.

Cara: I think we can all agree on that. Hear, hear. So, what do we need to keep in mind when someone starts challenging an issue that as a Christian we feel strongly about?

Bryan: So, one of the things I mentioned in the message, it's hard to hate somebody you're sitting down having a cup of coffee with. And so, I think it's really helpful to engage people in relationships and break down some barriers. But I think it's also helpful to remember the most important thing is people need Christ. Until they come into a relationship with the resurrected Christ, nothing of significance is going to change. So, if anything I'm doing is making that less likely, then I think I'm making a strategical error.

But to the question, I think it depends. It depends upon the circumstances and the situation. So, if it's a neighbor across the back fence that just wants to argue politics, I don't see the point of that. They're not listening. Nothing's going to change. If it's in an environment where there are others listening and I have some concern that they're going to believe some things that aren't true, I might enter into that conversation, not thinking I can necessarily change the person that's talking's mind, but I might want to put some truth out there, because others are listening. Maybe want them to know there's another side to all this, but at the end of the day, my behavior can't contradict my message of the Gospel, or I'm not really going to accomplish the ultimate goal that God's called us to.

Cara: That's good advice. I always think, I don't want to lose my testimony, so I'll just chill out on this a little bit.

Arnie: So, Bryan, you know my background's in psych, and I was pretty much trained with this thought, that almost anything, if it's a natural desire, then it must be morally acceptable. And often the thinking is, well, God made me this way. So, if that's true, then almost any behavior, not all, but almost any, could be considered okay. Help us with this, because I know as a behaviorist, I know it's really confusing even to Christians.

Bryan: Yeah. It's one of the things I love about this statement in First Peter, is because it specifically addresses this issue of natural desires, and Peter's very clear abstain from natural desires. So you're right, we're in a culture where in attempt to excuse behavior that the Bible says is wrong, we want to argue that if it's natural [right], then that means it's created by God, and that means it's right, versus the biblical message that sin has corrupted everything on planet Earth, including our desires, and he's very clear - abstain from natural desires. As a matter of fact, it's very helpful to go back to the book of Galatians, Chapter Five, Verse 19, talks about the works of the flesh. We could just as easily call them the desires of the flesh. These are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife's, seditions, heresies, envying, murders, drunkenness, revellings and things like this. So, it's like we don't say those things are right, just because there's a natural bent to our flesh for these things. So why would we say there's some other desires are morally right, just because our flesh desires that?

Cara: That whole list is actually legal in the United States, even murder, look at the abortion debate and abortions that are going on. I tell my kids, just because it's legal doesn't mean you are to do that.

Bryan: Right? [Yeah.] as a matter of fact, Romans says it'll destroy you. [Right.]

Arnie: I think one of the things I missed as a kid raised in very strict, legalistic, good Christian home, and I don't mean that sarcastically. It was a good home - is that sin is fun. I mean, you go down a road and it doesn't start out as being awful. As a matter of fact, it's very different from what Mom and Dad said. It was fun. And so, it does seem natural and you just go in this downward spiral.

Bryan: Yeah. Jesus said wide is the road that leads to destruction. [Yeah]. Yeah.

Cara: Well, so then I ask this: you reminded us then that life as a Christ follower is hard enough, but then we add self-destruction to the list of the problems that we have. And I'm sure you see a lot of those self-inflicted wounds then as a pastor.

Bryan: Yeah, I see it all the time. So, I love Peter's argument here. We'd start with the fact that life is hard. It just is. And then life is really hard for a Christian because you're living out of sync with the culture. In this case, they were persecuted Christians. So, on top of that, why would they make life even harder by their own self-inflicted wounds? And I see it all the time as a pastor, it, lives had enough without doing this to yourself. You know, the whole study of First Peter is about hope filled living in a culture of despair. And I think people feel that despair deeply and they're looking for help. And I think we at Back to the Bible are working to make inroads into people's lives to help them live hope filled lives. Arnie talk to us a little bit more about that.

Arnie: Yeah, that's so right. We exist here to help you move closer to Jesus today than you were yesterday. And a big part of that is our great Bible teaching. We have an app, a goTandem app, a spiritual growth app that meets you where you are spiritually and helps you move through your struggles. But everything we do is based in God's Word, and helping you navigate in this day and age of despair, to support you in your daily walk with Jesus Christ. Because it truly is about a relationship. And we want you to listen to our Bible teaching daily. Anything you can do to help yourself on a daily basis, move closer to Jesus today than yesterday. It's what we're all about.

Bryan: So, it'd be fair to say the resources are there for people that want help.

Arnie: And they're free.

Cara: Well, I use goTandem. In fact, before I was even a believer, I used it because I was embarrassed that I didn't know any of these things. And so, I used it to grow spiritually. And look where I am today. It's awesome. [gotandem.com](http://gotandem.com).