

Living in Submission

February 8, 2026

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

1 Peter 2:11-17

Session Outline

1. Abstain from Sinful Desires (1 Peter 2:11)
2. Conduct Yourselves Honorably (1 Peter 2:12)
3. Submit to Authority (1 Peter 2:13-17)

Theological Theme

As citizens of heaven (not the world), we should resist sinful desires and live honorably, submitting to authority God has put in place.

Call to Action

Consider the places you need to fight against the flesh and submit to God's will.



Leader Guide

Living in Submission

Introduction

Sometimes doing the right thing means going against human logic and conventional (human) wisdom. One example of this from Scripture is the story of Ruth.

After the death of her husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law, when Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi encouraged her to go back to her family's home, Ruth refused:

But Ruth replied:

Don't plead with me to abandon you
or to return and not follow you.
For wherever you go, I will go,
and wherever you live, I will live;
your people will be my people,
and your God will be my God. —Ruth 1:16



Ruth went with her mother-in-law in faith, despite the uncertain and dangerous future ahead of them. She chose a path contrary to what many in her shoes would have done and contrary to conventional wisdom of the day.

Living among the Israelites, Ruth, a Moabitess, looked different. She was an outsider. But she humbly obeyed what her mother-in-law bid her to do, and in a miraculous string of events, Ruth ended up marrying an honorable, wealthy landowner named Boaz (Ruth 4).

Ruth and Boaz went on to have a son named Obed, who had a son named Jesse. And Jesse had a son named David, who went on to be a king of Israel. And down the line, another king—the true King—came from their line: Jesus.

Ruth made a choice that likely surprised those around her. It wasn't a safe choice, but it was an honorable one, made not out of regard for herself,

but for others. In our reading today, Peter addressed a similar issue: combatting the desires of our flesh to live differently than those around us.

-  Have you ever been in a situation where you made a godly choice that confused or surprised the people around you?
-  What other examples do we see of this in Scripture?

Session Summary

God's people are "strangers and exiles" (1 Peter 2:11) on earth. Our true citizenship is in heaven, and our allegiance lies with Christ, not our culture. As such, this should inform the way we live. We should not give in to the sinful desires of the flesh, but rather live as God has called us.



Just like Christ, we should live honorably when we are wrongly accused (following Christ faithfully means we will face opposition). When we live honorably, people notice, and our behavior points toward Christ, honoring God.

Another way we live honorably is by submitting to authority. Ultimately, those in authority have been placed there by God, even when they do not honor Him, and He will use them for His purposes. Unless abiding by the law or submitting to authority causes us to disobey God, we should do so. We are to show honor and respect to everyone, love our brothers and sisters in Christ, and fear God.

Disciplined Living

In 2:11-12, Peter suggested three reasons Christians must discipline their lives. First, Christians were foreigners to their pagan environment and were not adjusted to it. Second, if Christians yielded to the flesh, they would wage battle against their best selves. Third, self-discipline and obedience had a wholesome influence on unbelievers.

1. Abstain from Sinful Desires (1 Peter 2:11)

-  What does it mean that God's people are strangers and exiles in the world? Consider those who were literally exiles in the Old Testament. How might this inform our understanding of this idea?
-  How is this connected to our calling to "abstain from sinful desires"?

In this new section of Peter's letter (marked by the opening of "dear friends," v.11), Peter called his readers to good works, even when it doesn't make sense by human standards. This is exceptionally hard to do.

Just before this, Peter emphasized our status as believers:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people,

but now you are God's people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. —1 Peter 2:9-10

Peter said one way in which we will “proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9) is by living honorably.

In this verse, Peter called his readers “strangers and exiles.” Strangers and exiles typically have less rights than people who are native to a land. Many of Peter's initial audience were living in the Roman empire and had less rights than a Roman citizen.¹

This status as outsiders (the NLT translates this helpfully as “temporary residents and foreigners”) was doubly true for Peter's initial audience. They were, in some cases, literal foreigners living under Roman occupation, and also spiritual foreigners, living temporarily in this world. The same is true for believers today (Philippians 3:20).

Since we are citizens of heaven (followers of Christ), Peter advocated that we should “abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul.” This idea of struggle with sinful desires (and how these oppose the Holy Spirit) is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. But what types of desire was Peter referring to? Paul gave a basic list in Galatians:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. —Galatians 5:19-21

Submission to these desires is characteristic of a nonbeliever, a citizen of this world. But are not to be true of a citizen of heaven and follower of Christ. These “wage war against the soul.”



How have you experienced the tension of the desires of the flesh warring against the desires of the Spirit in daily life?

2. Conduct Yourselves Honorably (1 Peter 2:12)



What do you think it meant for Peter's original audience to conduct themselves honorably among the Gentiles? What does it mean for us today?



What was the goal of living this way among others? How does this still apply today?

Following his previous guidance to “abstain from sinful desires” (v. 11), Peter said to “conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles” (v. 12). Living honorably here means to follow Jesus’s example and live as God calls us, regardless of what our culture deems appropriate or “good.” We are held to a higher standard.

Have you ever been in a scenario where you abstained from participating in an activity in obedience to God and others were thrown off or took offense to you doing so? Maybe they perceived you were judging them as you tried to do the right thing by your faith. In response, it is possible you might face slander or personal attacks in a moment like this.

If you have ever been unfairly accused of doing something, you know how difficult and frustrating this can be. Scholars believe at least some of Peter’s readers must have been enduring unjust slander and accusations of doing evil when they were actually trying to the right thing according to God.² Jesus warned us that this would happen:

“If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, the world hates you. Remember the word I spoke to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they don’t know the one who sent me.” —John 15:18-21

It is helpful in times like this to remember and consider Jesus. He (the Son of God!), too, was unjustly accused of wrongdoing, and yet He consistently lived honorably. He understands the opposition we face, and He lived as the perfect example in these moments.

Peter noted that, though the situation is unfair, when we seek to live honorably as Christ desires, people will notice our “good works.” Peter said living this way will be noticed and it “will glorify God on the day he visits” (this probably in reference to the day of judgment³).

Don’t miss Peter’s point: When we behave honorably (even when the situation against us is unfair), we glorify God. This should be our aim in all our actions! Our lives should continually point to Christ. And when we live this way, people notice. The Holy Spirit can and does use this to draw people toward Jesus.



How might godly living give you opportunity to point others to Jesus daily?

3. Submit to Authority (1 Peter 2:13-17)



Peter wrote practically regarding the authority of the time in these verses. How might this translate to our lives today?



What type of submission did Peter call for in this passage? How can we submit as free people?

In our current cultural moment, “submit” is a word many don’t like to hear. We embrace personal freedoms and buck against that inhibits our ideas of freedom. Peter told his readers to submit to human authority “because of the Lord” (v. 13). This may seem in conflict, but Paul taught the same thing in Romans 13:1-2.

Depending on how you date the letter of 1 Peter, the emperor Peter referred to may have been Nero, who was exceptionally vicious and cruel in his mistreatment and persecution of Christians. Still, Peter advised that Christians should strive to be good citizens even when their situations are particularly extreme.⁴

But didn’t Peter just bid believers to do the right thing even when others didn’t? Peter himself stood against the Jewish religious leaders when they were ordered “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:18). Submission to earthly authorities doesn’t mean we should disobey God. We must first obediently submit to God’s authority and will, and then submit to earthly authority as long as it does not lead to disobedience before God.

Peter says we should submit “because of the Lord” (v. 13) and names this as “God’s will” (v. 14). Doing good in these scenarios silences “the ignorance of foolish people” (v. 15). One practical reason for this is that the government can mount less of a case against you when you are following the law (there was no need to bring further negative attention to the newly growing church, it already had plenty of opposition!).



How does submission to Christ actually bring about true freedom?

Though we have freedom in Christ, our freedom is found in godly living, not doing anything we desire. Peter ends directly: “Honor everyone. Love the brothers and sisters. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (v. 17). As fellow image bearers, all people (including nonbelievers who oppose God) are worthy of treating with respect. We are to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are to fear God (living in daily submission to Him). As we live this way, God is glorified and others are pointed to Him.

Conclusion

Peter opened this section of his letter by reminding believers of their status as “strangers and exiles” (v. 11). This was doubly true for many of them, as foreigners living under Roman occupation, and believers in Jesus living as a temporary resident in the world. This is true for us today, too. Our true citizenship isn’t in America or anywhere else in the world, it’s in heaven.

As followers of Christ and strangers on earth, Peter instructed us to “abstain from sinful desires” (v. 11) like the ones Paul named in Galatians 5 as desires of the flesh. These are in direct opposition to the Holy Spirit, and we are called to live different from the world. One practical way we do this is by submitting to authority. We are to show honor and respect to everyone, love our brothers and sisters in Christ, and fear God.

- ❓ Why is it tempting to live the way our culture does instead of the way God calls us to live as strangers and exiles on earth? How do we pursue this daily?
- ❓ How can our group seek to live honorably among others together? How does this build up the body of Christ?
- ❓ How might living honorably among others give you opportunity for gospel conversations this week?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for calling you out of darkness and welcoming you into His family. Ask for His help as you resist sinful desires and choose honorable conduct, even when it’s unfair or difficult. Ask for the grace to honor others, love fellow believers well, and submit to authority in ways that bring Him glory.

Memory Verse

Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits. —1 Peter 2:12

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in 1 Peter* by Daniel Akin
- *1–2 Peter* by R.C. Sproul
- *1 Peter* by Wayne Grudem



Historical Context of 1 Peter

Purpose

First Peter emphasizes that suffering is normal for believers because they are temporary residents in this world. As such, they lack rights and receive no justice in this foreign land. Though suffering occurs on earth for temporary residents, their inheritance and exaltation await them in their eternal homeland.

Author

The author of 1 Peter identified himself as “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1). He viewed himself as a divinely ordained, directly commissioned, authoritative representative of the Lord Jesus himself. Several statements in the letter indicate that the Peter who plays a prominent role in the Gospels is the author. For example, he called himself an “elder and witness” to Christ’s sufferings (5:1). Further, he described Christ’s crucifixion with an intimate knowledge that only a disciple would have of that event (2:21–24).

Setting

The recipients of 1 Peter are identified in 1:1. Peter wrote to the “exiles dispersed abroad in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.” These were Roman provinces located in the northern part of what is now modern Turkey, unless Galatia includes the Galatia in the southern region of Asia Minor. These people were likely persecuted Gentile Christians. They had earlier been involved in idolatry (4:3), were ignorant (1:14) and “empty” (1:18) before they came to Christ, and formerly were “not a people” but now were “God’s people” (2:9–10).

Special Features

First Peter provided encouragement to suffering believers living in northern Asia Minor who faced intense persecution. The letter encourages faithfulness while under oppression. Specifically, God’s holy people should lead distinctive lifestyles as temporary residents in a foreign land. Although they will suffer for Christ while in this non-Christian world, they should remember that heaven is their future homeland.

Extended Commentary

1 Peter 2:11-17

2:11–12. A sense of urgency marks this section. It is important that we take very seriously our identity in Christ and begin to demonstrate spiritual growth through our daily lives. Aliens and strangers in the world repeats the opening address of this letter (see 1:1). It reminds us that as temporary residents in this world we should show a certain detachment from the world. A believer should abstain from certain behaviors. The word suggests a holding back, a walking away from, or an avoidance of what are described as sinful desires, which war against your soul. “Sinful desires” is best understood as “strong desires motivated by selfishness.” Some desires are not wrong or sinful in themselves. These become wrong when the believer attempts to satisfy those desires in ways that are contrary to God’s Word. Other desires are wrong “out of the gate” and are to be avoided. (For a more detailed description of what these desires are, see 1 Pet. 4:3 and Gal. 5:19–21.)

Why should Christians abstain from such things? Because these actions mount a full military campaign against our spiritual vitality and growth. Consistently satisfying our desires in a manner contrary to the Word of God or consistently giving in to sinful desires will ultimately tear down the believer. To entertain such desires may appear attractive and harmless, but they are enemies which inflict harm on the Christian’s soul, making us spiritually weak and ineffective.

The opposite result is described in verse 12. This verse makes it apparent that the early church was under immense scrutiny and criticism. Rumors and false accusations abounded. Christians were accused of being disloyal to the state, or Caesar. They were accused of purposely hurting the business enterprises of the city and of being godless people because they did not own idols. Peter advised them not to try to defend themselves or to argue with words against their accusers. Instead, they should take a positive approach and demonstrate a different quality of life that non-believers will observe.

This verb refers to more than a casual observation of a person’s behavior. It means “to watch over a long period of time.” It suggests making mental notes and reviewing them. Our behavior over the long haul should be so positive that it will dismantle the negative accusations. That’s why Peter wrote, Live such good lives among the pagans (*italics added*). That kind of lifestyle testimony may be the argument that wins the critic to Christ: they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Some interpreters suggest that this day of visitation refers to the judgment of God as the second coming of Christ. In light of the context, this seems unlikely. Peter’s desire was for his readers to witness positively to nonbelievers through their lives, so it is more likely that the “day of visitation” refers to the time of their salvation, when God visits them with mercy and grace.

2:13–15. In 2:13–3:12 Peter illustrated several specifics of the “good” life. He first focused on the believer’s response to leaders in their culture and government. Submit is the overriding action required of believers. The word means “to place yourself under someone, to rank under someone.” Here it is essentially a synonym for obedience. Of course, submission to authority does not involve actions that are sinful or contrary to the Word of God. The believer is to obey except when commanded to sin. This is the Christian’s responsibility toward all forms of human authority. The all-encompassing nature of this responsibility is underlined in Peter’s emphasis on every authority instituted among men.

The apostle Peter wanted believers to submit willingly, but his words are not presented as an option, but as a command. We are to submit because that is God's desire for his people. He wants us to trust him because all governments and authorities are ultimately appointed and controlled by him.

Doing good (v. 15) reconnects the reader with the living of good lives in verse 12. The emphasis is on doing what is right in God's eyes. This results in a positive behavior model of believers that provides a powerful testimony for the character of God and an argument against the false accusations of the non-Christian community.

2:16. Submission to authority does not eliminate freedom from the believer's life. Perhaps this concern prompted Peter to speak to the subject of freedom. The freedom of the New Testament is not political freedom but spiritual freedom. The great freedoms of the Christian life are: (1) freedom from the ruling power of sin in our lives; (2) freedom from guilt because our sins have been forgiven by God; and (3) freedom from the impossible obligation of attempting to earn favor with God through perfect obedience.

The Bible emphasizes that in those areas where the Word of God gives no command or primary principle, we are free and responsible to choose our own course of action. This is a freedom to choose what is right. Christian freedom does not allow us to do wrong. It does not permit us to disobey human laws unless these are in direct conflict with God's ways. Nor does our freedom permit us to disobey God, because we are servants of God.

This word (*doulos*) literally means "a slave." We are free, yet paradoxically we are slaves who serve God with our lives. Christian freedom is always conditioned by Christian responsibility. Christian freedom does not mean being free to do only as we like; it means being free to do as we ought.

2:17. Before returning to the subject of slaves in verse 18, Peter offered a summary word of counsel. Respect for everyone indicates that we should approach relationships with others with a positive point of reference. We should see others as having value or honor. In the culture of that day, this could easily have been missed. The Roman Empire included sixty million slaves. Roman law considered slaves not as persons but as commodities with no rights. In effect, Peter calls us to "remember the rights of human personality and the dignity of every person. Don't treat people as objects." With this as an operating principle, we have a special obligation to each other as believers: to love each other (cf. 1:22).

The next summary counsel is to fear God. This is the reverent fear that leads to obedience, introduced in 1:17. The last summary counsel concludes concisely the subject introduced in verse 13, adding that in our submission to authorities, we must do so with an honoring, valuing attitude. Otherwise, our submission is cheapened and it bears little positive testimony to the character of God.⁵

References

1. NIV Life Application Study Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
2. soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/1peter/1peter.htm
3. Ibid.
4. NIV Life Application Study Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
5. David Walls and Max Anders. I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude. Holman New Testament Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999.