Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

You are watching this livestream service because of laws made by our government. And gathering for worship will be illegal until the government moves us down to level 2. And there have been awful scenes from protests about lockdown laws in Australia in recent days, and here in NZ, individuals and couples are facing charges for breaking lockdown laws by leaving Auckland. And if it goes the same here as it has in other countries, the focus will soon shift away from lockdown laws to laws about masks, vaccines, and social distancing.

And in the middle of all of this, I am sure that we have all received emails and posts from relatives or friends about Bill Gates and vaccine science and the true agenda of governments, or we are the ones sharing such posts with our family and friends.

So, while I often have to try and think about ways that the sermon text I am preaching on is relevant for today, that was not the case this week! And that is because this passage is clearly relevant to all these Covid-related matters. In fact, just this past week I read an article from the IX Marks website entitled, ‘*Must Churches Follow Mask Mandates?*’ Here in NZ, the current guidelines from our government for worship services in level 2 *recommends* wearing masks but they are not *required*. But many other governments around the world have made mask wearing at church mandatory, and that may happen here also. So, churches all around the world are asking if churches follow these government mask mandates? And in the IX Marks article, the author cited a pastor friend whose elders discussed this matter and concluded that the answer is **Yes**, churches must follow mask mandates, *because of our text*. In the letter of explanation that they gave to their congregation, they quoted verses 13-14 and said that these verses provide an open and shut case – we have to be subject to government, full-stop! But the article also referenced other churches who answer was **No**, we do not have to obey mask mandates.

Well, if you are hoping to hear a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answer to that question, in this sermon, you will be disappointed. For a start, that is something that the elders, together, would have to consider, and I am sure they would do so in consultation with all of the Reformed churches in New Zealand. But one thing I hope we can all agree on is that nowhere in this passage, or anywhere else in Scripture, do we find the words: Churches must or must not follow mask mandates. To answer a question like this, we have to consider the relevant biblical principles. And this passage is a very important and relevant biblical principle for a matter like this.

Last week, from **verses 11-12**, we saw Peter return to the theme of Christian living. And in verse 12, we saw that that we have a duty to “*keep [our] conduct honourable among unbelievers*.” Well, as Peter now gets into the nitty gritty of what ‘keeping our conduct among unbelievers honourable’ looks like, he begins with the Christian’s attitude towards government. And every English Bible version begins verse 13 with the command to “*Be subject to*” or “*Submit yourselves to* [government].” So, very plainly, **honourable conduct means submitting to government**. And we will consider what this means in four points, which I will identify as we go through the sermon.

1. So, let’s begin with the **Striking Command** to Submit to government. We read, “*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.*”
   1. And the Greek word translated as “subject” or “submit” is a word that comes from the **military** **world**. It literally means ‘to arrange in formation under the commander.’ You see, in the military, you have the commander at the top, then generals and captains and lieutenants and sergeants, etc, all the way down to the lowly private. And the duty of each person is to submit to all those who are higher in rank, end of story. And the reason for this is obvious, you simply cannot have every person in the military free to decide what orders they will or will not obey. So, inferiors must submit to the commands of superiors.
      1. And this is how God has designed human society to function, as well. There are to be governors or governments who are the superiors and citizens who are the inferiors. **Romans 13:1** is very plain about this: The “*governing authorities … that exist have been instituted by God*.” And our text and Romans 13 explain that the task of government is to “*punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good*.” And Romans 13 also speaks about taxes and revenue and respect. So, governing authorities are the superiors who get to pass laws and require taxes, etc, and citizens are the inferiors who are commanded by God to submit.
      2. And this is what makes this such a **striking** command. If the Holy Spirit led Peter to use a word that comes from the *military*, then we were meant to see this not as a suggestion or advice that we can easily ignore, but as close as you can get to an absolute command – “*be subject … to [government]*”!
      3. And so, from this, it follows that the *fundamental* or *default* attitude of followers of Christ towards governing authorities must be submission – obey the laws, pay the taxes, and show respect.
   2. And let’s just remember **the political situation in Peter’s day** – governments were persecuting Christians. Jewish leaders were rounding up Christians and torturing them and imprisoning them and even killing them, as we read in Acts. This is why the believers Peter wrote to were exiles! And the Emperor at this time was Nero, who had feasts in his garden where he would use burning Christians for lighting. And Christians were being fed to the lions in stadiums for public entertainment. But the Holy Spirit, through Peter, says, “*Be subject … to every human institution*.”
   3. Now, I want us to see that this is not some new, New Testament principle.
      1. In **Proverbs 24:21-22**, it says, “*My son, fear the LORD and the king, and do not join with those who do otherwise, for disaster from them will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin that will come from them both*?” So, we must not in any way align ourselves with those who are fundamentally anti-government.
      2. In **Jeremiah 29**, as we read earlier, the people of Israel, who had been exiled to Babylon, where they were now ruled by the King who had invaded and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, were told by God to “*seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare*.” And eventually we see that men like **Daniel, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego**, served in the Babylonian government.
      3. So again, the *fundamental* or *default* attitude of God’s people towards governing authorities must be submission – obey the laws, pay the taxes, and show respect.
   4. Now, just in case you are wondering about exceptions to this rule, as in, is it ever right *not* to submit? or what laws do we *not* have to obey? those are fair questions, which the Bible does address, but it does not address them here. The Holy Spirit could have led Peter to write some more verses about exceptions, but He did not. What He wants followers of Christ to focus on here is our submission.
2. And our text drives this point home, as we notice, secondly, that Peter adds a **Divine Motive** to this Striking Command. And he does this in two places: In **verse 13**, in the middle of the command to “*be subject … to every human institution*,” we see the words, “*for the Lord’s sake,*” and then in **verse 15**, he says, “*For this is the will of God.*”
   1. So, because human government is God’s *design* and because submission to government is God’s *command*, we **owe** Him our subjection to government. So, plainly and simply, before anything else, this is our *duty*.
   2. But if you look at **verse 21**, we do this also to **imitate the example of Jesus Christ**: “*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps*.”
      1. Perhaps you remember the account of the time when tax-collectors asked Peter if Jesus paid the half-shekel tax? And Peter replied that He did. And later, Jesus said to Peter, “*From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" And when [Peter] said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free."*” And Jesus’ point there was that as the King of kings, He was not really subject to some earthly tax. So, He could, quite rightly, have refused to pay it. But Jesus continued, “*However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself*.” So, Jesus submitted to human government.
      2. And if you recall when we looked at the whole arrest and trial and crucifixion of Jesus, in John’s Gospel, it was one instance after another of complete and utter injustice and illegality and brutality. But Jesus submitted to it all! And this was a necessary part of what He did to secure our salvation!
      3. And so, we ought also to *follow* *the* *example* of Jesus.
   3. But the last part of verse 15 provides us with another aspect of why obeying government as the Lord’s will is necessary: “***that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people***.”
      1. Have you ever had it that someone had a bad and wrong opinion about you? Maybe they had heard something that was not true or put 2 and 2 together and come up with 7.5? Well, sometimes the only way to change their opinion is by your deeds – do the opposite of what they accuse you of doing.
      2. And that is Peter’s point here. I will explain why, shortly, but in Peter’s day, Christians were generally viewed by unbelievers as unruly and rebellious citizens. And the only way to change this opinion was for unbelievers to see Christians be subject to government.
      3. And we know from history that as more and more Christians did this, Christianity became very attractive and the church exploded across the empire.
   4. And we face a similar situation today in terms of Covid.
      1. Do you remember the largest cluster of the lockdown back in February? The Mt Roskill *church* cluster. And what is one of the largest clusters of the current outbreak? The Samoan *church* cluster. And that is not in any way to suggest that those churches were doing something illegal; they were not. But churches are under the nation’s microscope; we are being watched.
      2. And a couple of weeks ago, Stuff ran an article entitled, “*Covid-19: Mark of the beast or manna from heaven? Christianity’s vaccine issue*.” Here is what the article said:

*While most church leaders support the public health measures, a few are stoking fear and confusion among their flock.* In an online sermon of Murray Watkinson of Celebration Centre in Christchurch, he said that *“the Covid-19 vaccine could be the mark of the beast*,” and that *“Covid-19 was ‘all about’ the government trying to control people, in accordance with the end times.” “Watkinson is not alone among Christian leaders in his unwillingness to support the national pandemic response.”* And then Destiny Church’s Brian and Hannah Tamaki and City Impact church leader Peter Mortlock​ are identified as expressing similar views.Now, the article also identified many NZ church leaders who supported the government’s efforts, *“including the vaccine.”* But the article ended with a comment from a sociology professor who said that there are *“evangelical fundamentalist churches [that] … feel let down by the Government … They tend to be suspicious of the role and reach of government, especially governments aligned to the Left.” People in those churches would opt to trust their pastor and a particular belief in God, rather than the Government and the health system during a pandemic, he said.”*

* + 1. So, do you see what is at stake here? Is the church in NZ developing a reputation for being unruly and rebellious in regard to Covid? Are we putting to silence the ignorance of foolish people through our submission to government or giving them what in their minds is just cause to reject the gospel by coming across as anti-government? And this includes behaviour as simple as referring to our prime-minister as Aunty Cindy, which is not in keeping with the respect that the Lord commands us to show our leaders.

1. Well, in case we are still not getting it, Peter adds a **Necessary Caution** to the call to Submission in verse 16: “*Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God*.”
   1. I wonder if it has occurred to you to ask why submission to government was the first thing that Peter addressed as he got into the nitty gritty of Christian living? And why did he make his case, so directly and strongly? Well, there are probably several reasons, but the Gospel proclaims Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord/King. **Philippians 2** says that Jesus “has been given the name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” So, it is not difficult to see where this glorious truth would have taken many believers in this time of intense persecution – Christ is my King, so I don’t have to obey government! And we know from records from Peter’s time that this was a commonly held view. Earlier I mentioned Nero using burning Christians to light up his garden parties and Christians being fed to lions as public entertainment. And while many of us might have this picture in mind of innocent Christians being tortured and killed for no good reason, sadly, that is not how it was, with many. Listen to this historian:

*Christians seem to have provoked a great deal of hostility and to have made themselves outstandingly unpopular. Tacitus wrote around AD 110 that they were "notoriously depraved". Nero, he noted, had arrested Christians in Rome for arson and for other antisocial behaviour. Suetonius (AD 70-160) recorded that Claudius expelled them from Rome for causing continual disturbances … Christians were sporadically investigated by the authorities, mainly because they were believed to have been promoting sedition. They seem to have been unnecessarily secretive and did little or nothing to counter beliefs that they opposed the established government, apparently because they did oppose the established government. They reviled the Imperial capital, referring to it as the Whore of Babylon. They looked forward to its destruction (as in Revelation 14:8). They prayed for the end of the world: "Let grace come and let this world pass away". Indeed it was widely believed that they tried a number of times to ignite fires that would destroy the world and hasten the coming of their new kingdom.*

This then is why Peter needed to write what he wrote here and to express it as strongly as he did! Christians had a reputation for being unruly and rebellious!

* 1. And we will have opportunity to think about the application of verse 16 with a related verse in chapter 4, but the major point here is that although we are free of sin’s condemnation, and from slavery to sin, and from a ‘this life is all there is’ mentality, we have not been set free from the duty to submit to government. And one aspect of the IX Marks article about masks that I appreciated was its handling of the difference between ***Religious* freedom** and ***Christian* freedom**. And I think it will help for me to quote some of the article:

*Religious freedom concerns the church’s relationship with the world and its governments—our outward posture. Christian freedom concerns our relationships with each other inside the church … —our inward posture.*

*Something is a matter of religious freedom … when it’s been formally affirmed by one’s entire church [or] presbytery … (depending on your polity) as binding on the whole church. If something is instead merely a matter of individual conviction that hasn’t been formally affirmed by the church, you can, in your inward posture, say to other Christians, “Please respect my Christian liberty in this matter.” But you should be a little more cautious about claiming it, in your outward posture, as a matter of religious freedom. To be sure, you’re free to speak to your conscience with outsiders. But have the humility to recognize that you’re not formally representing Christ or Christianity in the same way a church … does when it makes a formal declaration of belief.*

*In other words, there’s a difference between “I believe” and “We believe.” If we in the West are moving into a time in which the government increasingly pushes against the free exercise of our faith, it will be tempting to forget that difference, especially since, as individualistic Westerners, we’re not accustomed to recognizing that distinction in the first place. But we can’t forget it, lest in our outward posture we turn Christianity into “everyone [doing] what’s right in his own eyes” (see Judges 21:25).*

At the recent synod, we heard from one of our Reformed sister churches in Australia about a congregation that had split over the government mask mandate. And I don’t know all the details, but that it is just tragic and wrong. We are commanded to be subject to government. And in **Philippians 2:3-4**, we are pointed to the person and work of the Lord Jesus and commanded to “*Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others*.”

1. And this is the precise point of the last verse of our text where we see, fourthly and lastly, the **Proper** **Attitudes** of Submission: “*Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor*.”
   1. And there is so much that we could mind from these short commands, but the while this does not come out in English, in the Greek, the first phrase – “Honour everyone” is in a tense that implies a past decision with continued effect, while the other three are kind of every-day attitudes.
      1. So, we are to, once and for all, decisively, adopt the “*honour everyone*” attitude and then live it out, every day. It is our default attitude, it is our fall-back position, it is our ‘go-to posture,’ it is the cloak that we put on – I will honour everyone.
         1. When I was a child, my parents taught me **JOY** – Jesus first, others second, yourself last.
         2. Or, as we heard from **Philippians 2**, “*In humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others*.”
         3. So, we assume the best of others, we give them the benefit of the doubt, we put our comfort and well-being behind theirs.
      2. And then, each day, we live by this creed: “*Love the brotherhood, fear God, honour the emperor*.”
         1. And we have already talked about our **love for our brothers and sisters** with 1:22-2:1: “*We love one another earnestly from a pure heart”* and we“*put away*” the love-spoiling attitudes described there.
         2. And we have already talked about our duty to “***fear God***” in 1 Peter 1:17. We know that God is judging our daily deeds; we can either please Him or displease Him. And clearly, submitting to government pleases Him.
         3. And so, “***Honour the emperor***.”
            1. And because this duty is put right alongside the love we owe the brotherhood and the fear we owe God, this is clearly important.
            2. But notice also that we are only to fear God. God alone is ultimate and absolute authority; only He must *always* be obeyed. There are times and situations when it is right to disobey government. But that is a sermon for another day.

Congregation, what we are called to in this passage has been described by one commentator as **evangelistic citizenship**. When we obey these principles, it makes Jesus attractive. That is what is at stake with our posture towards government. So, may the Lord give our elders and deacons much wisdom as they make decisions about covid matters, and may he give each of us wisdom and humility, for the sake of our witness to the world. Amen.