



**Temple Baptist Church**  
Wilmington, North Carolina  
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The Lord's Day, July 2, 2017

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**The Best Thing Christians Can Do for Their Country**  
**1 Peter 2:11-17**

Happy birthday, USA! This Tuesday we'll celebrate the 241<sup>st</sup> birthday of the United States of America.

Most of us here today were born in this country, and we love it dearly. We realize it has plenty of faults, and there's a lot about the way things are going that cause us concern, especially in matters of morality and justice. But we love our country and want what's best for it.

***Trying to do what's best . . .***

Whatever you thought of him as a person or as a president, John F. Kennedy's words from his inaugural address still challenge us: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

As responsible citizens or residents of this nation, it's important for us not only to *want* what's best for our country, but to *do* what's best for it.

Back in the late 1970s, a group of Christian leaders met out of concern for the direction of our country, especially in terms of moral issues. They concluded that the best way to bring our nation to spiritual and moral health and wholeness was through the political process.

They organized effectively at both the grassroots and national levels. They influenced political platforms so that they included language and ideas that sounded very traditional and morally conservative. Candidates from both parties and some independents talked the talk when it came to traditional values. Many of the candidates that these concerned Christian citizens supported won their elections—from local to statewide races to Congress, even the presidency!

They were *politically* successful, but look where we are nearly 40 years later—the moral decline has only gotten worse, and those who oppose it are vilified!

Now I want you to understand something here. While I have my own deeply-held personal moral and political convictions, I'm neither advocating nor attacking one political party or the other, or one politician or another. I'm simply stating the facts of our situation as I see them.

And here's what I see. *It hasn't worked.* Though these well-meaning religious leaders wanted what they felt was best for our country, using the political process to achieve it simply *has not worked.*

And why is that?

I've heard financial radio talk show host Dave Ramsey quote his grandmother on numerous occasions. He says that she often said, "He who is persuaded against his will remains unpersuaded still."

You see, it's a matter of the will and of the heart. It's *not a political problem* that we're facing in our nation. It's a *spiritual crisis*. Since it's not a political problem, trying to address it by means of the political process is like trying to repair a computer with a monkey wrench or run

an automobile on water! No, it's a spiritual crisis, so it has to be addressed spiritually.

### ***How do we do this?***

So how do we address this problem with a spiritual approach? We can learn a lot here from what Peter told his readers in our text.

He calls them to live ***as foreigners and exiles*** (2:11),<sup>1</sup> abstaining from sinful desires, living ***such good lives among the pagans*** that their way of life will lead even those who accuse them of wrongdoing to glorify God (2:11-12), and gives them some practical ways to do this.

The first is submission ***for the Lord's sake to every human institution***, especially governmental authorities. Their role is to keep order and execute justice in the world (2:13-14). Paul goes so far as to say in Romans 13 that government's authority is God-given and God-ordained. However, Scripture as a whole and the apostles' own example tell us that when government goes beyond its God-ordained role and usurps the honor and allegiance that is due to God and God alone, Christians must be faithful to Christ as Lord.

Now keep in mind that when Peter says what he does here, he's talking about the government of the Roman Empire, no friend to Christianity at this point. In fact, it wouldn't be too long after Peter wrote his two letters that he would be executed by this same government. Yet he says here that submitting to such proper authority was God's will, and that it would ***silence the ignorant talk of foolish people*** (2:15). So he calls them to ***live as free people***, yet not to use their freedom ***as a cover-up for evil***, but rather to ***live as God's slaves*** (2:16).

Then he sums it all up: ***Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor*** (2:17). And notice the order and extent of those last two things.

In other words, Peter was saying to his readers (and now to us) that *Christians powerfully impact the world around us by living in faithful obedience to God.*

### ***The power of salt and light . . .***

Many of the great social reforms that have taken place, like the abolition of slavery and child-labor, have grown out of the influence of Christianity and its moral values and teachings. But what came first was a time of *revival* in the churches, when Christians became much more serious about their walk with Christ and their obedience to his way of life, then a *spiritual awakening* in the land, when many who were not believers became faithful followers of Jesus. As their values changed, the values of the society they were living in began to change, and that led to official actions to set wrongs right from a legal perspective. But it was *not* a matter of the church using the political process; it was a matter of the church being the church, functioning as salt and light in a dark and corrupt world, just as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, changing hearts and minds and eventually the society and culture.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great the twentieth century British pastor of the Westminster Chapel in London, put it this way:

The world today is looking for, and desperately needs, true Christians. I am never tired of saying that what the Church needs to do is not to organize evangelistic campaigns to attract outside people, but to begin herself to live the Christian life. If she did that, men and women would be crowding into our buildings. They would say, "What is the secret of this?"<sup>2</sup>

Sometime in the mid- to late second century, a Christian work appeared that was called *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*. In it, the writer describes what it is that distinguishes Christians from the world around them. He writes:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven . . . .

To sum up all in one word—what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, *Christians powerfully impact the world around us by living in faithful obedience to God*. When we live as Christ calls us to live, when our attitudes and our actions conform to his will, it has a positive impact on the world around us. People see the difference. And at first, it may seem to turn them away. But when we live this way consistently, embodying Christ's presence to the world around us, eventually some, maybe many, will be drawn to Christ.

Bill White of Paramount, California tells about a Saturday afternoon community service day he was involved in some time ago. About 50 volunteers from a local church, all wearing yellow shirts, had just finished a complete makeover of a house on a narrow side street he was walking down in the city of Compton, California.

When Bill was still a few houses away he passed a married couple working in their own yard. He paused to compliment the woman on her roses, and she asked him what they were doing down the street. He told her they represented some churches united in a desire to serve the city. They chatted about the radical neighborhood transformation she had witnessed by these simple acts.

During their conversation the woman's husband had been weed-whacking on the other side of the front yard. But when he saw Bill's yellow "volunteer shirt," he turned off his weed-whacker, set it down, and walked over. Bill says, "I will never forget his words. After looking into my eyes, he nodded approvingly towards the renovated house down the street and then said,

‘I love your heart. Where can I get a heart like yours?’”

Flabbergasted, Bill simply said, “We got our hearts from Jesus, and he would be glad to give you one like his, too.” And that led to what Bill called “a great conversation about the unparalleled gospel of Jesus Christ and his power to change hearts, homes, neighborhoods, and cities.”<sup>4</sup>

Now to do this, we have to have a heart like Jesus—his heart beating within us. We have to yield to him so that he lives out his life through us, both individually and as a congregation. That’s when we truly embody his presence to those around us. That’s our witness to the world—a witness that consists of both our works and our words, that’s made with both our lips and our lives.

My brothers and sisters, not only is this the way of Christ, the way of God’s kingdom, which is foremost.

It’s also the best thing we can do for our country!

†*MEG*

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).

<sup>2</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 18.

<sup>3</sup> “The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 26-27.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/november/6110810.html> (accessed 06-28-2017).