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Godly Living, Part 3

When it comes to Acts 6 two things ought to come to mind:

- 1) The establishing of the diaconal ministry and
- 2) The first Martyr of the New Testament Church... who so happened to be one of the first deacons, Stephen!

The Bible remembers Stephen as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). And it was this — more than his intellect or wit — that dumbfounded the Jews who debated with him regarding God and His Kingdom. Not being able to contend with Stephen, these Jews, “...stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and dragged him

away, and brought him before the Council [which was the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Judaism].” (Acts 6:12)

What happened next truly was amazing. This relatively uneducated Christian (by Jewish standards) stood before the most educated, intelligent, and powerful Jewish men of his day and confounded them- even though they brought forth false witnesses who testified against him! After the testimony of these false witnesses, the high priest asked rather tersely, “Are these things so?” (Acts 7:1). In response, Stephen gave a powerful presentation of the gospel (Acts 7:2–53) which infuriated the Jewish leaders even more!

Stephen was martyred that day, yet the testimony of his love for God and His unwavering faith in Christ would never be forgotten!

Acts 7:59-60, “And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon *the Lord* and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ And having said this, he fell asleep.”

I can think of no better embodiment of the teaching of the passage before us! In the face of wrongful arrest, deceitful testimonies, and a cruel/painful death, Stephen “submitted to the governing authorities” of his day, yet he did so “for the Lord’s sake” —4- and so trusting and relying upon Christ through it all!

And the result? Stephen’s death left a lasting impression upon those persecuting him, including one young rabbi named Saul!

The year in which 1 Peter was penned was 64 AD and many of God’s people were facing the same fate as Stephen. Accordingly, Peter gave this important instruction as to how God’s people were to live in a hostile world as citizens of a secular state that sought their death.

The Ability

We pick the passage up as it explains how God will enable the believer to demonstrate the same faith and confidence as Stephen

1 Peter 2:16, “Act [or ‘live in light of your status’] as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but *use it* as bondslaves of God.”

This is a loaded exhortation. In the secular world of Rome at this time, “freedmen” spoke of the coveted status that a select group of people acquired in which they went from being a slave with few rights before Rome to being “a freed man” who had the ability to determine where they might live, who they would marry, how they would work, the people with whom they chose to associate, and much more. In fact, so important was this status that a group of Jewish freedmen organized a guild known as “The Synagogue of the Freedmen” which we read about in Acts 6:9.

Peter is talking about much more than this coveted status; for he is addressing a condition that went way beyond the legal system of Rome to a formal standing in the Kingdom of God. And what is that standing? As a result of Christ's redemptive work (cf. 1 Peter 1:18-19), those who are saved have been delivered/freed from:

- Sin's condemnation (Romans 6:7, 18; 8:1-2).
- The Law's penalty (Galatians 3:13).
- Our inability to earn merit before God through individual obedience (Galatians 5:1-14; Acts 13:39; Romans 6:23).
- Oppressive Guilt (Galatians 3:13; Revelation 1:5b).
- Satan's bondage (cf. Romans 16:20; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 2:13; 4:4).
- The world's control (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19; Galatians 4:3-5; 5:1; Colossians 2:20).
- Death's power (Romans 8:38-39; 1 Corinthians 15:54-56).

In Christ we have been delivered FROM all these things UNTO a love-relationship with God predicated upon His cleansing work! Truly, we are Christ's Freedmen who have been:

1 Peter 1:3b-5, "...born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

Christian, in light of this, what is there to fear on this side of the grave? What in this world could possibly hold us captive? The threat of a bad man? An oppressive government? The loss of a job?

Just as when he called us "beloved" and "aliens and strangers" in v. 11, Peter appeals to the glorious position/standing we have in Christ to get our minds and focus off of worrying about what the world might think of us or do to us! Truly the more we give ourselves to what God has given to us, the less impact this world will have upon us!

Yet sadly, many in Christ choose to live another way! Rather than living in light of the freedom they have in Christ, they used their freedom as a "covering for evil".

The word for "covering"¹ refers to the placing a mask or veil over something to conceal its true identity. And sadly, rebellious Christians do this all the time. They use holy conduct and godly speech to conceal a wicked desire, an aberrant lust, or a false agenda. And we see it in Corinth! THE creed by which many in Christ were living at this time was "all things are lawful"! (1 Corinthians 10:23) With this phrase, Christians justified these things:

- Sleeping with prostitutes.
- Getting high on drugs.

- Abusing their bodies.
- Attacking other Christians.
- And so, living in the flesh!

One must see that this is a perversion of the highest order! We have NOT been saved/freed so that we might serve our flesh. RATHER, we have been saved so that we might be “bondslaves of God.”

The concept of a “bondslave” is an important theme in Scripture. Freedom in the Bible does NOT mean freedom or the ability to do as one might desire. RATHER, it means freedom or the ability to do what God desires.² We have been freed from the slavery of sin and Satan that we might be restored to the glorious position of being a slave of almighty God! Paul describes it this way:

Romans 6:16, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone *as* slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?”

We were created to be servants of the Living God. Now if the God of the Universe were an evil, wicked taskmaster, we might bemoan our creation. Yet the Lord who made us is good, gracious, and loving. As such we could not conceive of a better purpose than to have been created to serve Him! C. S. Lewis describes it this way:

Paradisaical man always chose to follow God’s will. In following it he also gratified his own desire, both because all the actions demanded of him were, in fact, agreeable to his blameless inclination, and also because the service of God was itself his keenest pleasure, without which as their razor edge all joys would have been insipid to him. The question ‘Am I doing this for God’s sake or only because I happen to like it?’ did not then arise, since doing things for God’s sake was what he chiefly ‘happened to like’. (Lewis, 2015, p. 86)

But what came as a result of the Fall of Man? It didn’t free man from slavery. Rather it transferred man’s service from a kind and glorious Being to that of a wicked, evil being!³ Paul speaking of the call of the elder correctly says:

2 Timothy 2:25-26, “...those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.”

This is the state of every non-Christian; they are slaves of Satan! And herein is the greatest irony this world could ever know: On account of sin, the non-Christian is not aware of their enslavement. Paul describes the non-believer as living:

Ephesians 2:2, “...according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.”

But herein is the Gospel — the Good News! On account of His grace and mercy, God sent His Son to restore His people to their original and glorious position as servants of God! When the Christian lives in light of this position, they are free from worldly constraint for now their one and only concern is pleasing, loving, and serving the One who bought them! Thomas Schreiner observed this:

Those who use freedom as license for evil reveal that they are not truly free since a life of wickedness is the very definition of slavery. (Schreiner, 2003, p. 131)

In this regard, consider the exhortation Paul gave his Roman brethren.

Romans 6:19b-22, “For just as you presented your members *as* slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in *further* lawlessness, // so now present your members *as* slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.”

So, when it comes to living as citizens in a hostile world the only way we can do that is by living according to the “freedom” we have in Christ and so the freedom to

- Delight in the Lord.
- Glory in our position as sons and daughters of God most High!
- Revel in His grace.

If this is our daily passion as well as our most glorious treasure, the world, its treatment of us, and its view of us will be of little importance!

So, if you want to embody the call of Peter in this text to “Submit to every human institution”? It will only come as you and I submit first and foremost to King Jesus and so give ourselves to delighting in Him!

In this regard, success (submitting as did Stephen before his persecutors) will come easier as we prove victorious on four fronts.

The Key to Victory: Winning on Four Fronts

1 Peter 2:17, “Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.”

Here Peter gives four fronts we need to win if we are going to live Godly lives in the public arena! As we approach this list of exhortations, consider the words of Richard Baxter as he warned ministers:

All that a minister doth, is a kind of preaching; and if you live a covetous or a careless life, you preach these sins to your people by your practice. If you drink, or game, or trifle away your time in vain discourse, they take it as if you said to them, 'Neighbours, this is the life you should all live; on this course you may venture without any danger.'... One proud, surly, lordly word, one needless contention, one covetous action may cut the throat of many a sermon, and blast the fruit of all that you have been doing. (Baxter, 1999)

Family of God, the world is watching! Knowing this, Peter chose four realms or fronts by which we will be judged by them. Let's consider each one.

First Peter says this: "honor all men."⁴ This is an important command! By nature, we make distinctions when it comes to other sinners. Whether it be their race, gender, or social standing, we make distinctions! This in fact is one of the things that separates us from God (cf. Romans 2:11). With God there is no distinction; but with man, we make distinctions all the time! It is hypocritical when a sinner condemns another person for a racist comment (as if they themselves aren't racist)! We are all racist, every one of us! That doesn't mean that it is O.K. to discriminate on account of race. Rather, it means that if we should cry foul we must "look to ourselves lest we too be tempted"! (Galatians 6:1)

In light of this, Peter begins with a very important command when it comes to faithful living in the public realm: in all places at all times, do NOT make distinctions! Do NOT allow yourself to look down upon another sinner! Rather, "honor all men"! The word is *τιμάω* (*timaō*) which carries the idea of thinking and so treating other people as more important than yourself (Philippians 2:3)! In this regard we must do this:

Proverbs 4:24, "Watch over [our] heart with all diligence, for from it *flow* the springs of life."

This is so important. What we allow to occupy our minds when it comes to other people will directly impact what we believe, what we say, and what we do with regard to them. For from the heart "flow the springs of life." And so, what we think in our hearts about white people, poor people, uneducated people, and the like will eventually come out! Accordingly, Peter here exhorted, "In your hearts and at all times, honor all men."

Secondly, we must "love the brotherhood." This is such an important front in our battle for godly living in a secular world: loving our brothers and sisters!

Most of you are familiar with Philippians 4 and the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche — two women who struggled to get along. Now we know that it was not on account of a sinful belief or action that the two were divided. If that were the case, Paul would have given an exhortation to one or both of the women. Instead, Paul called upon the church to help them get along (Philippians 4:1-2). So, what was the problem? Paul gives us the answer in Philippians 4:8 where, in the context of Euodia and Syntyche's disagreement, he said this:

Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true [in the other person], whatever is honorable [in the other person], whatever is right [in the other person], whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence [in the other person] and if anything worthy of praise [in the other person], let your mind dwell on these things.”

That is the essence of “brotherly love”! Accordingly, if we do not actively practice this — that is, “love the brotherhood” — we will get tripped up when it comes to pursuing a godly witness in the public arena. How is it that all men will know we are Christians? Christ said that it would be “by our love for one another” (John 13:35)!

You must see that just like our thoughts about other people, what we allow our minds to meditate upon when it comes to our brothers and sisters eventually will come out! If you have never studied Ephesians 4:25-32, you have missed an important exhortation. The text consists of a series of put on/put off commands in the context of the body life of the church. Toward the end of the passage, Paul gave a strong warning about a progressive sin-cycle that we must avoid as Christians when it comes to one another.

Ephesians 4:31, “Let all bitterness [settled anger] and wrath [inward agitation] and anger [inward agitation expressed] and clamor [loud yelling] and slander [blasphemy] be put away from you, along with all malice.”

Do you know what “malice” is? It is actively seeking to hurt a brother or sister publicly. That means taking swings at them in the public arena — before non-Christians! Knowing that this is NOT the witness we want before a watching world, Peter secondly exhorts the opposite: “Love the brotherhood!”

This brings us to a third front when it comes to godly service in the world, fear God. Talk about an important command! It is so easy to fear man, isn’t it? It is so easy to be moved NOT by what honors or pleases the Lord, BUT by what will:

- Make our bosses and co-workers most happy.
- Make our friends believe that we are not weird.
- Secure a good opinion on the part of man.

Living in light of this fear is a fast track to compromise when it comes to what we profess, believe, value, and honor as a Christian. Accordingly, Peter rightly warned his persecuted brethren the same way Solomon did years before.

Proverbs 29:25, “The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted.”

Interesting! The opposite of “fearing man” is “trusting God”!⁵ Once again, the more we give ourselves to delighting in and loving Christ, the greater will be our faithfulness in the public

realm!

With that we are brought to the fourth and final front in the battle for godly living in a public arena; honor the king. This is an important command for the day in which we live. Think of our current and most recent presidents: [Trump](#), [Obama](#), [Clinton](#), and [Bush](#). To say that their presidencies polarized our nation would be an understatement. You either loved these men or you couldn't stand them! And yet, if you had to choose between any one of these men and one of the Caesars, who would you choose hands down, every day of the week? Any one of our current or most recent presidents! Next to Nero, Clinton was a boy scout!

Now, if God would have His people "honor Nero", most certainly we can honor any and every president, premier, prime minister, or king that serves a nation, By this we mean:

- We speak of them with respect.
- We separate our opinion of the man from our opinion of their presidency and so seek the welfare and good of the individual.
- We pray for them.
- We long for God to redeem them.

This and much more is involved in "honoring the king."

When we take on each of these fronts and prove faithful to the Lord, our light most certainly will "shine before men in such a way that [as they] see [our] good works" they may "glorify [our] Father who is in heaven"!! (Matthew 5:16)

That is the call of God when it comes to His people living in the public realm! May God give us the grace so to do!

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End Note(s)

¹ ἐπικάλυμμα (*epikalumma*)

² Wayne Grudem wrote, “True freedom, true ability to choose and do what one really wants to do, comes paradoxically in entire submission to God as his obedient servants (cf. Jas 1:25; 1 John 5:3)” (Grudem, 2009, p. 129)

³ John MacArthur wrote, “No bondage is as terrible or enslaving as that from which Christ redeems us. In Him we are freed from sin, from Satan, from judgment and condemnation, from hell, and from the curse of the Law. From the slavery that really matters, every Christian has already been delivered. In Christ we have the greatest, most complete, and most glorious freedom possible. A person who is the Lord’s freedman, and who will remain so throughout all eternity, should not be overly concerned about remaining in human bondage for a few years.” (MacArthur, 1984, p. 174)

⁴ “What is the significance of the first command being in the aorist tense (timēsate) rather than the present tense? At first glance it is tempting to conclude that the following verbs ‘love’ (agapate) and ‘fear’ (phobeisthe) may have different tenses because of the nature of the verbs. That is, ‘love’ and ‘fear’ are in the nature of the case ongoing attitudes. One could respond, of course, that the same is true of ‘honor.’ Most important, though, the verse concludes with the imperative ‘honor’ (timate) in the present tense. Hence, any attempt to explain the variations in the tense by the meaning of the verbs fails since Peter used the same verb twice. Indeed, it is difficult to come up with any satisfying explanation for the variation, for it is not evident why Peter would emphasize that the emperor should be honored in an ongoing way in contrast to all people. I conclude, therefore, that the difference in tense is not interpretively significant and that all four imperatives are generalizations that apply to one’s entire life.” (Schreiner, 2003, pp. 132-133)

⁵ cf. (Psalms 36:7; Proverbs 3:5; 14:26; 16:20; Isaiah 26:4)- and this no matter how difficult our circumstance may be (cf. 5:7; Psalms 34:22; Proverbs 29:25; Nahum 1:7; 2 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Timothy 1:12).