

Jesus' Suffering and Our Suffering
Palm Sunday 2011
1 Peter 2:18-25

Several of us were recently at a conference for E-Free churches in Kansas and Nebraska. One speaker challenged us to evaluate how we think about the local church. Is the church as a fortress, a force, or a fragrance? If we viewed our church a fortress, our focus would be upon keeping people safe and sound inside our walls and keeping everybody else out. Where we're located, we could even dig a moat around the building and install a drawbridge. The second option is to view our church as a force. We would basically be telling everybody, "We are a force to be reckoned with. You better take us seriously 'or else.'"

The third option – the one the speaker advocated – was the church being the fragrance of Christ. This is actually what we're going for here at Faith E Free. We want the fragrance of our lives to give people a sense of what it means to have a relationship with the God of the Universe. We believe that our long-term influence in this community and in the remotest parts of the earth depends on being the fragrance of Christ.

One of the ways the NT tells us that we can be a fragrance of Christ is to suffer as Christ suffered. One of the most distinctively Christlike things we can do is respond the way Jesus responded when He was mistreated. Today we are going to look at 1 Peter 2:18-25, a passage that explains how Jesus' suffering provides a pattern for us to follow when we are mistreated. This passage will force us to evaluate whether or not we *really* want to be Christlike – whether we really want to be the fragrance of Christ. . . . or whether we basically just want a little Jesus now and then when we think we need Him. In other words, this passage challenges us to serious discipleship – living our lives as He lived His. Next week we'll consider how Jesus' resurrection informs our lives; but today we will see how His suffering informs our lives.

A Few Comments about the Context of 1 Peter 2. In this passage Peter addresses servants/slaves who might be mistreated by their masters. He tells them to respond the way Jesus responded when He was mistreated. When we read a passage that addresses slaves, we naturally think about slavery as it existed in the first centuries of the United States. We may even think, "How can Peter tell slaves to submit to their masters and patiently endure when they're mistreated? Isn't Peter implicitly condoning the existence of slavery?" Those are valid questions; passages such as this one have at times been used to justify slavery. But it's quite a bit more complex than that.

For starters, Peter and the other apostles (or Jesus for that matter) didn't challenge directly evil social structures of the Roman Empire. To do so would have reduced Christianity to one more political faction. As we'll see, their approach was much more covert and much more subversive.

Another factor to consider was that slavery in first-century Roman Empire was quite different from institutional slavery as it existed in the United States. Slavery in the Roman Empire wasn't based on race. Slavery didn't necessarily mean a low station in society; slaves could be "doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea captains" (cited in McKnight, p. 166). While most slaves were born into slavery (because their mothers were

slaves), some chose slavery voluntarily because it provided a stable household and a steady income. After a period of time there was the prospect of being freed and granted the full status of a Roman citizen. For some slavery was a temporary condition “on the path to freedom.” It may well be that Peter had this prospect in mind when he wrote this passage. At the same time - as this passage reflects - there was also the tendency for masters to mistreat their slaves/servants. Due to the evil within the human heart, power tends to be abused.

I mention all of this to help us understand Peter’s context and to help us understand the implications for ourselves. Verses 18-20 challenge us to think about how we respond when we’re mistreated.

Our Suffering: “patiently enduring” when unreasonable people treat us unjustly. (2:18-20)

18 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.

A few verses earlier (3:13) Peter used the same term (“submit”) to urge the entire church to “submit” to human institutions – kings, governments, etc. When you submit to governing authorities, you acknowledge its God-given role in an orderly society – even if you don’t agree with everything it does. Paying your taxes is an act of submission – even though you probably don’t agree with everything that our state and federal governments do with your tax dollars. Basically, submitting to governing authorities means that you do what the government requires unless it requires you to sin.

In a similar way, Peter urges servants to submit to their master – to do what they say. And do it respectfully – acknowledging their authority in your life. He qualifies himself to make sure they don’t think he’s saying, “Submit to them if they’re good, gentle, people making reasonable requests.” No, he says, “but also to those who are unreasonable.” Why would Peter demand something like this?

19 For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.

God is actually pleased (it “finds favor” with Him) when we suffer well after being treated unjustly. When our consciences are fully engaged and we say, “Because I am Yours, I will patiently endure this injustice,” God is pleased. Peter gives a contrasting and clarifying scenario in verse 20:

20 For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.

There’s nothing particularly virtuous about sinning and then patiently suffering the consequences. If you run a stop sign and get a ticket for it, nobody’s impressed when you dutifully pay the ticket. You got what you deserved; you did what you had to do. But what if your boss/supervisor at work is difficult and demanding, makes fun of you in front of others

because of your faith, gives you the jobs that nobody else will do, and never complements you? If you “endure it with patience” and if you “do your work heartily as to the Lord, knowing that it is the Lord Christ whom you serve,” then God is impressed. He looks favorably upon your life.

Beginning in verse 21 Peter explains why he is advocating this type of suffering. Simply put, such suffering is Christlike. Since this is how Jesus suffered, this is how those apprenticed to Him are supposed to suffer.

Jesus’ Suffering: an example for us to follow. (2:21-25) Notice Peter’s logic beginning in verse 21:

21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, 22 who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth;

Every person who has entered into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ has been “called” into that relationship and into a certain lifestyle. We don’t come to God and individually negotiate terms that we find agreeable. No, we are *called* to follow Jesus Christ just as the original disciples were called to follow Him. One aspect of that calling involves following His example of suffering.

Most Scriptures that discuss Jesus suffering describe what His death on the cross accomplished in terms of paying for our sin. Peter will elaborate on that aspect of His suffering in verse 24. But Peter first explains how Jesus’ suffering informs our suffering. He actually left us an example (or pattern) to “follow in His steps.” The image is that of walking behind someone on a sandy beach and stepping in his/her very footprints. Peter wants us to imitate Christ in the way He suffered – stepping in the footprints He has left ahead of us.

Jesus’ example is especially relevant because He was completely blameless: Jesus “committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth.” In other words, His suffering was exactly analogous to the type of suffering that Peter had urged upon slaves with unreasonable masters who treated them unjustly. Peter is challenging them to suffer the way Jesus had suffered.

What specifically was Jesus’ example?

23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;

The gospels describe how Jesus was reviled: He was falsely accused of blasphemy, people spit on Him, the Roman guards beat Him with a leather whip containing pieces of bone in order to tear through His flesh, and bypassers mocked Him as a common criminal. How did Jesus respond? “He did not revile in return.” The most innocent person who ever lived refused to return insult for insult or evil for evil. The person who suffered the greatest injustice ever committed refused to “utter any threats.” Rather, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.” Hanging on the cross, Jesus was generous in the way He thought about those who hung Him there.

Peter writes that Jesus “kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.” Through His prayers and His actions Jesus basically said to His heavenly Father, “I trust You with my soul because You are the judge.” Remember that Peter is building the case for Jesus’ followers to suffer as He suffered. Peter isn’t saying, “Try to be a little nicer to people who mistreat you.” He’s saying, “Suffer as Jesus suffered.” If we suffer as Jesus suffered, we will be the fragrance of Christ.

Verse 24 describes what Jesus’ suffering accomplished:

24 and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

Jesus’ suffering wasn’t only an example; His suffering on the cross was payment for our sins. Peter already established that Jesus “committed no sin” (v. 22). And so His death on the cross wasn’t payment for anything He deserved; it was wholly for our sins. “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross.” Those who accept that payment through faith have great benefit: that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. As new creatures in Christ, we now have the capacity to put away sin in everyday life and live a life that pleases God (“live to righteousness”). Peter makes reference to Isaiah 53:5 when he writes, “for by His wounds you were healed.” His wounds – being beaten and flogged and nailed to the cross – brought healing to our lives. The sickness of sin has been taken away through His suffering.

25 For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

We’ll pick up this theme next week when we look at Jesus as the resurrected Shepherd of our souls (Hebrews 13:20-21). Peter is reminding his readers that they are not alone in this world. The One who died on their behalf is actively caring for their souls. If that weren’t the case, the prospect of following Jesus’ example of suffering would be unthinkable. Since Jesus is the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls, we can trust Him to take care of us when we suffer at the hands of unreasonable people.

Application. By way of application this morning, I want us to consider moving toward Jesus’ example of suffering in a couple of significant ways. Let’s think about a couple of specific ways that we can intentionally pursue Christlike suffering. The first involves evaluating our *desires* in this area.

Desire: Do I honestly desire to be like Christ in His sufferings? I know that the good Christian answer to the question, “Do you want to be Christlike?” is “Of course I want to be like Christ.” But being Christlike includes suffering like Him when we’re wronged and when unreasonable people treat us unjustly. I really want you to be honest with yourself on this issue. As yourself, “Do I honestly desire to be like Christ in His sufferings?”

Evaluate how you tend to respond when you feel insulted or misunderstood or mistreated in everyday life. Let’s put on hold the extreme cases of being persecuted or oppressed. Let’s begin

by evaluating how we tend to respond to people in everyday life. Are you patient and kind when somebody in your family says something insulting? Do you “patiently endure” when somebody in your workplace is unreasonable? Or do you tend to be indignant at all the incompetent and uninformed and insensitive people you encounter?

Example: A couple of years ago I hit a deer and had to have some body work done. I went to the body shop to pick up my car; I figured that I’d be in and out in a couple minutes. When I got there, the woman at the desk wanted me to pay the entire bill. I explained that I’d given the other guy my insurance information and that I just needed to pay the deductible. She didn’t know anything about that. . . so she told me that I’d need to wait until the other guy got back and began to help the next person in line. The longer I had to wait the more frustrated I got. I didn’t expect a congressional medal of honor, but I wanted a little more respect than that. Eventually I got so worked up that I told the lady, “I need to leave. I’ll call you later.”

Needless to say, there was nothing distinctively Christian about my response. Nobody in that office got a whiff of the fragrance of Christ. It was not my finest hour. The lady behind the desk probably wasn’t thinking, “Wow, I want what he’s got.” I have to admit to myself that when I encounter people I think are being unreasonable, I am not naturally Christlike. You may say the same thing. The question is, “Do I *want* to be like Christ the next time I run into someone I think is unreasonable?” Is that my desire? Is that your desire? In Philippians 3:10 Paul wrote that he wanted to know Christ – not only the power of His resurrection but also the fellowship of His sufferings. He wanted the commonality of suffering as Christ suffered.

We need to be honest about our tendency to be un-Christlike when we’re mistreated; and we need to decide if we’re willing to allow God to change our desires. If so, I’d like to suggest a prayer. This is the second way we can pursue Jesus’ pattern of suffering.

Prayer: “Lord, teach me to follow Jesus’ pattern when I’m mistreated.” Don’t underestimate the impact of praying a prayer like that from the heart. If you invite God to teach you to follow Jesus’ pattern of suffering, you might find yourself “in the classroom” more than you imagined. You will begin noticing how you react to people in your workplace, to people in your family, to friends, and to people in the church.

The first thing that will probably happen (if you pray this repeatedly) is that you will recognize opportunities to respond as Jesus responded. Instead of your natural response of endlessly defending yourself and being outraged that people don’t treat you as you think they should, the thought may just run through your mind, “I was called for this very purpose; Jesus left me an example so that I would follow in His steps.” Even though everything within you wants to treat the other person the way they’ve treated you, you can do what Jesus did: you can continually entrust yourself to God – that He will take care of you.

This doesn’t mean that you’re always passive when you’re mistreated. We have the blessing of living in a country with laws and with recourse to have wrongs righted. But even then we should respond graciously. Paul wrote in Romans 12:19, “Never take your own revenge. . . do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

As I mentioned earlier, this is one of the most distinctively Christlike things we can do in this life. Peter develops this further in chapter 3. After telling his readers not to “return evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead,” Peter writes this:

14 But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, *you are* blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, 15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;

People aren't very impressed that we go to church. I've never heard anybody say, “I'm just amazed that you give up a perfectly good Sunday morning to sit in a room with a bunch of other people. I want to be just like you.” But if you suffer the way Christ suffered – if you respond with patience when you're mistreated – they may just be stopped in their tracks and want to know what your life is all about. Peter suggests that this “fragrance of Christ” is a byproduct of following Jesus' pattern of suffering.

Honestly, if you invite God to teach you to follow Jesus' pattern of suffering, you will enter into a realm of Christlikeness that relatively few people ever enter. If you are bored with your life and want some excitement, enroll in the school of Christ and learn how to suffer as He suffered. Your life will become a laboratory for spiritual transformation.