

Suffering Unjustly

In 1 Peter 2 and 3, Peter gives what is sometimes called a “household code,” because it explains how believers are to conduct themselves within their households. A household could include several generations of a family as well as servants/slaves. Household codes, which were common among the Greeks and Romans, usually expressed the dominant perspective concerning what would promote a stable and strong society. Peter lays out a household code for Christians that takes into account the cultural norms of the first century for masters and slaves and for husbands and wives. At the same time he urges a distinctively Christian mindset in these relationships. These passages are important for us because if others don’t respect the way we relate to the people in our homes, in the workplace, and in our neighborhoods, they certainly aren’t going to respect our faith. Since our behavior is usually the first witness that we give, we need to pay special attention to the message that these relationships are sending. And this is certainly the case when we suffer unjustly.

Opening Question: What’s the worst job you’ve ever had?

Read 1 Peter 2:18-25

1. What is to be the basic attitude of servants to their masters (vv. 18-20)?
2. What possible good could come from a servant submitting to an unjust master?
3. Peter says that Jesus left an example that we are to follow (v. 21). What is His example? What did He do, and what did He not do in His suffering?
4. Since the master/servant relationship in the first century was in many ways an economic relationship, the 21st century employer/employee relationship is the closest to what Peter is addressing. We, however, have laws designed to protect employees from injustice in the workplace and so there are culturally appropriate ways to address injustice. Having said this, what are some implications of this passage to current difficult employment situations?

Steve said:

Peter assumed that injustice was a fact of life in the Roman Empire. Peter doesn't advocate revolt or even trying to correct the injustice that slaves experienced. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't address injustice that is embedded in social structures, especially since we have freedom to influence laws and policies. We are blessed . . . to have so much influence in such matters. But in Peter's day they were at the mercy of a totalitarian state, as are many people throughout the world today. In Peter's context, the emphasis was upon living within existing social structures in a distinctively Christian way. Just to be clear, the application here *isn't* that you should just take whatever happens to you in the workplace or in the home or in society in general. I have heard about horrible experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace; we can and should take advantage of resources to address such issues and to seek justice.

5. What might be a "distinctly Christian way" to deal with an unjust boss in our day and cultural situation?

Steve said:

Some people have basically vowed, "I will control my circumstances so that nobody can ever mistreat me. If I feel insulted, I will respond in kind. If someone mistreats me, they will feel my wrath - in word and/or in deed." Some people are just like the "old Peter," the Peter who rebuked Jesus at the suggestion that suffering unjustly could be the will of God. But if we reject that Jesus has left us an example to follow, we are basically rebuking Jesus who tells us, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). He's talking about a life of self-denial and a life of suffering. Jesus made it very clear that people would treat His followers just as they had treated Him.

6. The way of Jesus was not one of self-assertion; it was a way of self-denial and suffering. We live in a day that highly urges the assertion of personal rights. Though not all of this is bad, how does this passage speak to us about such things? How might a refusal to demand personal rights be good for the Gospel?
7. Regardless of what kind of suffering you might be facing, what can you learn from Jesus' example? What might it look like to keep entrusting yourself to God in your situation (v. 23)?

Slavery in the Ancient World

Slavery was a diverse institution in the ancient world, altering itself from one culture to another. Yet the Roman and Greek worlds anchored their entire economic system in this institution. Some have estimated that one-third of the population in urban areas was slave population. In both worlds, especially the Roman world (which is our interest for 1 Peter), slavery was not usually a permanent condition of life. Rather, it was a temporary condition on the path toward freedom. Many ancient people voluntarily chose to be slaves of a Roman citizen so that, upon being granted manumission as a result either of good behavior or adequate savings, they could become full Roman citizens. In fact, it is entirely possible that one reason Peter (and Paul) urged Christian slaves to be submissive and obedient was that by living obediently, they could be set free (if the slaves even wanted freedom; cf. 1 Cor. 7:21).

To be a slave was not to be assigned to a specific, especially low-class, station in life. Slaves had the status and power that was connected with their masters; if their master was powerful, they indirectly inherited that power too. Thus, it was desirable at times to be a slave. While most slaves of the New Testament documents were born that way (because their mothers were slaves), many chose slavery over the vagabond existence of finding odd jobs. The tasks characterizing slavery were immensely diverse, and we must avoid the notion that all slaves were manual labor servants. “Doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea-captains” all comprised the slave population.

Slavery was deeply entrenched in the patriarchal system of antiquity. Household heads (fathers) had immense power (*patria potestas*) over their charges, including the power to sell into slavery. Sometimes slaves converted to Christianity with their masters, but other times they converted on their own (as in 1 Peter 2:18–25). It is no wonder that Peter exhorts them in the context of household regulations; this is even more clear for Paul (Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–4:1). But this power of the father was sometimes abused; some slaves were both physically abused and sexually available to their masters (Seneca, *Epistle* 47).

The idea of slavery as the foundation of the Roman economy needs to be stressed, and this foundation may well lie at the heart of early Christian exhortations to remain submissive to masters. If it is true that slavery was the central labor force of the Roman economy, it follows that if Christians became known for opposing the institution, the Roman authorities would immediately, and perhaps even irreparably, damage the movement. Put differently, it was important to the survival of Christianity for its slaves to be good slaves. Since this was the case, one motive for Peter’s exhortation would have been the desire to survive as a movement.

Peter’s exhortation to live under the order as slaves emerges, then, from this economic context. He reminds them that they are to do this “with all respect,” or “with deep respect.” He insists that they are to show the same “deep respect” even to “those who are harsh.” Peter wants the Christian slave community to manifest a kind of behavior that transcends the norm of society and demonstrates its supernatural origins. In so doing, the economy will not be threatened, and the Christians will be seen favorably.

Scot McKnight, *1 Peter, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 164–166.