

Suffering Unjustly

1 Peter 2:18-25

We've seen in our study of 1 Peter that our behavior is typically the first thing that others notice about us as followers of Christ. That's why Peter urges us, "Keep your behavior honorable among the Gentiles . . . so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12).

We have come to a portion of 1 Peter that describes honorable/good behavior in the core relationships of our lives. 1 Peter 2 and 3 give a series of commands that are sometimes called a "household code" because it explains how they were supposed to conduct themselves within their households. A household could include several generations of a family as well as servants/slaves. Household codes were common among the Greeks and Romans; these "codes" usually expressed the dominant perspective concerning what would promote a stable, strong society. A household code explained honorable behavior between masters and slaves, between parents and children, and between husbands and wives.

Peter was aware that the dominant culture in Asia minor viewed Christians as outsiders. The behavior of Christians within their households would have been scrutinized very closely. 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 core relationships.

These passages are important for us because our conduct in the core relationships in our lives speaks louder than anything we say that we believe. 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.

This morning we are going to consider 1 Peter 2:18-25, Peter's instruction to servants/slaves. We're going to take a break from 1 Peter next week. The following week Brian is going to teach 1 Peter 3:1-7, Peter's instruction to husbands and wives (he really wanted to teach that passage so I donated it to him).

It's important to note that when Paul laid out his household code for the Ephesians, he had a much broader scope; in Ephesians 5 and 6 he addressed husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters. By contrast, Peter primarily addressed slaves and wives; he didn't address masters at all, and he spent relatively little space addressing husbands. This suggests that Peter isn't telling us everything we need to know about these relationships; he had a very specific focus, namely, how those who were the most vulnerable and least protected (slaves and wives) should conduct themselves.

As we work our way through these passages we'll need to discern the application for us in our culture. Peter gives some perspectives that transcend cultures; but he also

addresses some very specific cultural and societal situations. For example, in today's passage Peter tells servants to be subject to their masters, even if they are unjust. We really don't have an equivalent situation in our culture here in the US. We can **apply** what Peter says to employees in the workplace, but that is a very different context. We have laws that are designed to protect employees from injustice in the workplace. Businesses have HR departments that hear complaints and that address grievances. Peter was writing to servants who were living in the Roman Empire, a totalitarian state. We have to understand that context as we interpret these passages.

Let's notice in verses 18-20 how Peter addresses believers in Asia Minor who were "servants/slaves." After addressing this very specific example of suffering unjustly, Peter will explain that he is only urging them to imitate Christ in His suffering.

A specific calling for servants when suffering unjustly: Be subject to your masters. (1 Peter 2:18-20) Beginning in verse 18 Peter addresses "servants":

18 Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.

As Sam mentioned last week, "being subject" isn't mindless obedience; it involves relating rightly to others in positions of authority. Biblically speaking, when we submit to another person we are acknowledging that God has designed the world with a certain order that should be respected. Submitting to another doesn't mean that you have no voice or that you are less valuable than the person to whom you're submitting. Here Peter is urging servants to acknowledge that their masters have authority over them. That was a fact of life in the first century.

The respect Peter is urging here is most likely respect toward God, not toward their masters. Of course this doesn't rule out respecting their masters, but I think Peter is making a different point here. He is saying they should be subject to their masters out of respect for God. [This is the same term used for the "fear" of the Lord in 1:17.] Servants were supposed to say from the heart, "Out of my reverence for God, I will be subject to my master."

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 (yes, blessed by God) 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 remember a good friend telling me about a horrible experience of sexual harassment in her workplace; we can

and should take advantage of resources to address such issues and to seek justice. Again, we are blessed to have the freedoms we have.

I would also add that Peter isn't describing "excellent behavior" in the church. There will be times when we "overlook an offense" in the church. But when there is sin of any consequence we speak the truth in love. We confess our sins one to another, we repent, and we forgive each other. By contrast, Peter is talking about servants enduring injustice at the hands of unbelieving masters. By contrast, the book of Philemon is written to a believing master who was receiving back a believing servant/slave. There Paul urged Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother.

It's likely that some within the churches in Asia Minor were slave owners. They would have heard Peter appealing to slaves to be subject to their masters and to endure harsh treatment. Chances are that the Spirit of God within them convicted their hearts and prompted them to make sure that they didn't mistreat their servants. In a similar way, the Spirit of God within us prompts us to speak out on behalf of others who are treated harshly and to help change their circumstances.

But why would Peter tell servants in Asia Minor to be subject to their masters "not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust"? What possible good could come from submitting to an unjust master? Look at verse 19:

19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

Peter says that when their devotion to God prompts them to suffer unjustly, they will experience God's grace (His help and His favor). Persevering through trials and sorrows in this life invite the grace of God in our lives. This is an opportunity to practice what Peter will advocate in chapter 5: humble yourself before the might hand of God and cast all your anxieties upon Him. God gives grace to the humble. He really does care for us.

Peter makes an important clarification in verse 20:

20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

The truth of this verse is observable in everyday life. Nobody is very impressed when you pay a speeding ticket. But when you suffer financial loss because you refuse to take your brother to court (1 Corinthians 6:1-11), you will earn great respect. In a similar way, if you patiently endure unjust treatment, "this is a gracious thing in the sight of God." The favor of God rests upon you.

Given our 21st century American context, the idea of "suffering for doing good" offends our sensibilities, doesn't it? If one of my kids, for example, was being treated unjustly in school or in their job, I'd be inclined to tell them, "You don't have to take it!" I'd be concerned for their physical and mental health; my impulse would be to do everything

within my power to keep them from having to endure such hardship. There are certainly situations in which that mindset is warranted. But if I never allowed my kids to suffer for doing good, they would never learn the power of what Peter is teaching here.

As you know, it is possible to experience great injustice and become bitter and cynical, less humble and less open to the grace of God. That's a normal, natural response to injustice. But I've known others who - by God's grace - have endured great injustice but have suffered well out of reverence for God. They have emerged more humble and more able to receive the grace of God at every turn. They experience the abundance that Jesus promised. The ability to endure injustice is purely the grace of God, purely the fruit of abiding in Christ.

The world says that if you've been wronged, you are free to exact revenge and to lash out in anger. The alternative, Peter says, is to imitate Christ.

Our calling when suffering unjustly: Follow the example of Christ. (1 Peter 2:21-25)

21 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.

Notice a couple things about this verse. First, Peter says that we have been "called" to follow Jesus' example. This way of living is an integral part of our calling, not something optional or peripheral. Second, Peter says that when Christ suffered for us, He left us an example to follow. Of course Jesus' suffering on the cross was unique; He uniquely died as our substitute (something none of us can do for another person since none of us is sinless like Christ). But the **way** He suffered provides us an example "so that you/we might follow in his steps."

Maybe as a kid you played the game in the snow where you try to walk in someone else's footsteps; you try to step in exactly the same place they stepped. Peter is urging us as believers to do something similar in relation to Jesus. We are to notice the footprints of His suffering and try to step in exactly the same place He did.

What specifically is Peter talking about? He tells us in verses 22 through 25. In these verses Peter makes numerous quotes and allusions to Isaiah 53. This is the primary place in the New Testament that interprets Isaiah 53 as referring to Jesus, the **Suffering** Servant. Beginning in verse 22 Peter traces Jesus' suffering from His arrest to His trial to the cross.

22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

First Peter explains what Jesus **didn't** do. Jesus "committed no sin"; He wasn't suffering the just penalty of something He had done. Peter emphasizes that Jesus never committed sins of the tongue, which are very common when people are mistreated.

Neither “was any deceit found in his mouth”; he never spoke or answered deceptively. He was reviled by the Sanhedrin, the Roman guards, and even one of the men crucified beside Him. He was beaten and spat upon and crucified. And yet he never responded with insults and threats.

What **did** Jesus do? “[He] continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” He prayed, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46). In 4:19 Peter will tell us to imitate Christ:

19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Notice in 2:24 what Jesus’ suffering accomplished:

24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

Jesus bore our sins “in his body on the tree,” that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. Jesus’ physical wounds healed our spiritual wounds.

Peter does a masterful thing in verse 25. He makes reference to Ezekiel 34:11 in which God promised to the people in exile “I will seek out My sheep and will oversee them.” He says to those living in exile in Asia Minor:

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

Even though they were living in exile and even though they were called to suffer unjustly, the Lord was their Shepherd and was watching over their souls. They were not abandoned and they were not alone.

Commentators point out how ironic it is that Peter stresses imitating Christ in His suffering more than anybody else in the New Testament. Peter was the disciple who “rebuked Jesus” when Jesus started explaining that He was going to Jerusalem to be crucified. He had a visceral reaction to the idea that suffering could accomplish the will of God. And when Jesus was being arrested, Peter is the one who pulled out his sword and cut off the ear of the Roman servant (John 18:10-11).

But by the time he wrote this letter we call 1 Peter, Peter not only fully accepted that Jesus **had** to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, be killed, and be raised up on the third day. He also fully accepted that Jesus “left us an example that we might follow in his steps”! He now saw his suffering in light of Jesus’ suffering. He no longer looked at being mistreated as a curse or a distraction or a disqualifier. He understood his suffering as an opportunity to be Christlike.

As we approach the Lord’s Table this morning, I’d like you to consider whether or not you agree that Jesus has “left you an example, that you might follow in his steps.”

Again, I'm not saying that Jesus always wants you to "take it" every time people mistreat you. You may be in a situation that is physically and emotionally dangerous; if so, you may need to get out of that situation. But are you open to the possibility that it is **sometimes** the will of God for you to follow in Jesus' steps and suffer as He did?

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.

It's counterintuitive, but Scripture makes clear that If you want a life of joy, if you want a life of power, if you want a life of influence, follow Jesus and the example He left for us.

Perhaps there is a specific way in which Jesus is inviting you into the fellowship of His sufferings, a way in which you need to follow in His footsteps of suffering. As we pass the bread and cup, fix your eyes on Jesus who suffered for us, leaving us an example to follow in His steps. See your situation in light of His - not to trivialize what you're experiencing, but to gain strength and confidence to imitate Him. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead now lives within every believer. Surely this Spirit will guide and empower you.