

Called to Suffer Unjustly
1 Peter 2:18-25

Take your Bibles and turn to Matthew 16. Jesus said these famous words to disciples after Peter had tried to stop Him from going to the cross,

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (Matthew 16:24-26)

Could there be a clearer statement than that as to what it means to follow Jesus? One of the great idols of our day is convenience. We like to think of God as being completely happy with us as we are, rather than a holy God who is a consuming fire seeking to change us from within. We are living in a culture that values safety, convenience, and personal autonomy. To such a culture, Jesus words come across as radical, and that is because they are. He meant to be radical with that statement. Tonight, as we continue our study in 1 Peter, we come to another hot-button topic in our culture, and one of the most hard-hitting, counter-cultural passages in the New Testament.

Now, turn ahead to 1 Peter 2. Remember, last week, we saw that Peter began to deal with the subject of subjection to human authority. As Matthew pointed out last week, this whole passage falls under the umbrella of verses 11 and 12.

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:11-12)

That is really the ultimate goal that Peter has in mind for these Christians. Christians in the First Century were being slandered and persecuted. There were great persecutions from both the Jews and the Romans. Peter wanted to remind these suffering and persecuted Christians of the ultimate goal of their lives. He wanted them to adorn the doctrine they believed by living in such a way that others would glorify God. We do this through our meekness. Peter clearly saw a connection between honorable conduct and submission to authority. Which is why we have this lengthy discourse about subjection from verse 13 of chapter 2 through verse 7 of chapter 3. The bold and brash Peter, who had taken up his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane, is now the author of this passage about humble subjection. He had learned from His Master. Remember Jesus words,

²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:29-30)

As our Teacher and Example, Jesus models gentleness and meekness. He shows us how to be lowly. The Lord of all Creation has modeled meekness and subjection to authority. Just let that sink in for a moment. Peter is working his way downward through this section. He began with the highest human authority, the Emperor, and then governors sent by him. Now, from the realm of government, we come down into the household.

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 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. 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. 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. 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. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Peter 2:18-25)

We begin with the word “Servants.” Peter is addressing a specific group of people here. He is speaking to household slaves. I know that right off the bat, to our modern Western American ears, this word triggers all kinds of ideas. When we hear the word “slave,” usually a very particular image pops into our heads. We think of American chattel slavery. We think of the African slave trade and all of its horrors and abuses of human dignity and rights. We might think of the Civil War, and all the blood that was spilled largely on account of the issue of slavery. We think of the racism that was fueled by slavery in America, the effects of which still reverberate into the present day.

I would say that we should think about those issues. It is incumbent upon us as Christians living in this day and age to be well-versed in our own nation’s history in order to understand the times in which we are living. However, that is not what tonight’s message is primarily about. I am not going to delve deeply into the subject of American slavery because, while this passage certainly has much to say to us about American slavery, that is not the context in which this passage was originally written.

This passage was written in the First Century AD, in the days of the Roman Empire. The concept of slavery which Peter has in mind is not identical to what we have in mind when we think of slavery. There are similarities, and there are differences. First of all, it’s important to remember that slavery in Rome was commonplace. It was ubiquitous, and it was deeply entrenched economically into the whole structure of the Roman Empire. Wherever the Romans went, they enslaved the people whom they conquered. This was not something the Romans invented, either. It was the common practice of every nation and empire that preceded the Romans.

Some biblical expositors have tried to sugarcoat the word “slaves” in the Bible by saying that slavery in biblical times was not as horrific as it became in the African slave trade. The reality is

that there have always been different forms of slavery in this world. In every age, there have been some slaves who were treated horrifically by their masters, and there have been some slaves whose masters treated them well, with dignity and respect. Much depended on the character of the master whom you served. Our text speaks to this fact.

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. (1 Peter 2:18)

There you have the delineation between two types of slavery. There is slavery to a good and gentle master, and there is slavery to an unjust, or crooked, master. To be sure, a slave's experience would vary greatly depending on whether his master was good and gentle or unjust. There is no way to sugarcoat that word unjust. It is the Greek word *skoliois*, which means crooked, like a dried-out branch that is hard and twisted and gnarled because of its hardness. The command to slaves in both circumstances is to be subject to their masters with all respect or fear.

I don't know about you, but that strikes me as a very challenging command. It is offensive to many. I do not want to try to remove the offensiveness of this statement because it is implicit. It would have been offensive to many when Peter wrote it, and it is still offensive to many today. Many would say, "Who are you, Peter, to tell a slave who is being treated unjustly to continue in submission to that master?" That does not seem like the right course of action. Shouldn't Peter have said, "Slaves, if your master treats you well, be subject to them, but if your master is crooked and perverse, rebel? Raise your fist in defiance and declare to him, 'No justice, no peace!'" That is what many in our generation would tell them to do. Fight the power!

In such a culture, as Christians we are still called to be subject to human authority, but we must not bow down to idols of our day. We must not live by the mantras of our culture. Everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, but Christians must not. He sets us free. We are free from bitterness. We are free from wrath. We are not to harbor grudges. We are to forgive as we've been forgiven. As sojourners in this world, we are not to be overly concerned about our lot in this world. Remember, the main goal is that others will see our good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. That's our aim!

If you happen to be a slave, Peter is saying, do not be overly concerned about the fact that you are a bondservant on earth, and be submissive to your master however he treats you. In whatever role the Lord has placed you, be faithful. Paul speaks to this in 1 Corinthians 7.

¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches... (1 Corinthians 7:17)

²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a

freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. (1 Corinthians 7:20-23)

Notice that Paul does say that if the opportunity for freedom is available, take it. But ultimately, Paul is saying, that isn't what matters above everything else. The most important thing is that you are a freedman of the Lord. But the one who was not a slave when called is now a slave of Christ. See the balance there. The balance is found in the principle that Christians are free slaves, as we talked about last week. We are those who offer ourselves freely as slaves of Christ, which is what we were made and designed to be. This is not an either/or. This is a both/and. In Christ Jesus, we are both free and slaves. But the key is that we are not necessarily free in the worldly sense. In the world, we might still be a slave even though in Christ we are free. Neither are we slaves in a worldly sense. Our slavery is to Him, which frees us to face whatever kind of abuse and mistreatment we might encounter in this fallen world without bitterness or resentment. For those who are not slaves in a worldly sense, you are still slaves of God. There is a phrase in the English Common Book of Prayer, which traces its origins as far back as St. Augustine in the 4th Century AD, that captures this principle very well,

“[His] service is perfect freedom.”

Service to God equals perfect freedom. This is well-stated all the way back in the book of Exodus in these words,

¹⁶ And you shall say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, “Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness.” (Exodus 7:16)

That is Moses' and Aaron's repeated refrain to Pharaoh. God says, let my people go, free them, so that they may serve me in the wilderness. That is a wonderful encapsulation of the whole of the Christian life. We have been set free in order to serve God in the wilderness of this world. In this world where horrible corruption exists, where abusive and tyrannical forms of slavery exist, we are called to be free servants of God. Even if we are slaves of tyrannical and authoritarian leaders, which is so often something over which we have no control, we are still free servants of God. Nothing can or will change that identity. As free servants of God, we can be subject to any and every power structure under which we are placed in this world.

To touch on Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 7, though, if there is an opportunity to free yourself, take it. That verse could be seen as largely responsible for the movements toward the abolition of slavery that took place in the 18th and 19th Centuries in the West. As a new form of government, of, by, and for the people rose to power in this world, thanks in large part to the seeds of religious freedom sown during the Protestant Reformation, an opportunity for the freedom of earthly slaves arose with it. We, by the grace of God, live in a land where the God-given rights of individuals are enshrined in our Constitution. So, we have the opportunity to defend those rights and freedoms, which many of our fathers fought and died to make possible. As Americans, we have the ability to speak freely, and to live freely under the rights enshrined in

our Constitution. Being a citizen of America, therefore, carries with it a God-given responsibility to defend and preserve our Constitution, and the freedoms therein enshrined.

So, to conclude this discussion about slavery in this world, let me just briefly and bluntly deal with a modern objection that is often raised in connection with the Bible's teaching about slavery. It is often said today that the Bible never condemns slavery, and that the human abuses of slavery throughout history were the result of the biblical teaching on slavery. Is that true? To borrow an expression from the Apostle Paul, "*Me genoito!*" May it never be! No, let it never be said or even conceived. If the Bible was ever used to condone the mistreatment of slaves, it was due to a misinterpretation of the Scriptures. The Bible never teaches that it's okay for masters to abuse their slaves. There are actually many clear statements that masters should never abuse their slaves in the Scriptures. Here are just a few:

⁹ Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. (Ephesians 6:9)

Do the same to them, in this context, means render service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man. That verse in itself, if truly submitted to and obeyed, is enough to put an end to abusive forms of slavery. No earthly master can evade the command to stop your threatening, and to actually render service with good will even to his slaves. That's what the Bible actually teaches masters to do. For further evidence, take Colossians 4:1:

Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. (Colossians 4:1)

That verse follows directly on the heels of this great theological statement,

²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. (Colossians 3:25)

There, Paul was telling the slave that he could serve heartily under the authority of his master, knowing that whatever wrongdoing the master committed against him would be paid back by God without any partiality. That is a sobering warning to any masters listening. Listen, if you are in a position of authority in this world, you will be paid back for every wrong you've committed against someone under your authority. May we all take that fact to heart tonight. The Bible does not condone mistreatment of slaves. Rather, it holds before all the impartial truth that slaves and masters are accountable to God for how they serve in their respective earthly roles.

We can trust the One who will be the judge of every thought and deed of each and every individual who has ever lived in this world. God has control over the authority structures of this world, and we submit to Him by submitting to what He has ordained for this short, uncertain time of our earthly pilgrimage. Do so with Christian wisdom and discernment. Do so with a knowledge of the political structure in which you find yourself. If there are opportunities to

advance the cause of liberty and justice for all in your day, seize them, as far as it depends on you.

Let's move on to the reasoning Peter provides as to why slaves should submit even to cruel and unjust masters. Thank the Lord that Peter did not just stop with this command. I think he knew he needed to provide some explanation and reasoning for the command, considering how difficult the command is.

¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.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. 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. (1 Peter 2:19-21)

The phrase "a gracious thing," literally translates, "grace." Peter literally says, "For this is grace, when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly." How is this grace? Well, that should be rather obvious if we pause to consider what grace means. Grace means unmerited favor. Peter says in 1 Peter 5:10 that God is the God of all grace. That means that all grace flows from God. If there is grace, it is from God. He is the one from whom all grace flows. With that in mind, we can see that what Peter is saying here is that this action of being subject to someone who abuses you is actually an action that flows through you from God. This is God's power at work in you. His grace is working in you as you willingly and joyfully subject yourself to undeserved mistreatment.

Think about it this way. Does an unjust master deserve your subjection? No! That's what makes it grace. Did you deserve peace with God? Did you deserve Christ's death on the cross? Did you deserve a propitiation for your sins? Did you deserve God's favor? No! You deserved eternal separation from His holy presence. You deserved to be cast out into the outer darkness forevermore. Yet, Christ died for you! Therefore, you can do this because you are the recipient of divine grace!

In verse 20, Peter uses the counter-argument, you don't deserve any credit for suffering if you've actually sinned and earned the punishment that is being meted out to you. In fact, if you don't suffer that punishment, you are in debt. For instance, if you stole something, you don't get any credit for paying back with interest the cost of whatever it was you stole. Far from earning credit for that, as long as the balance is outstanding, you are a debtor.

But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing (or again, grace) in the sight of God. The word "in the sight of" is the Greek conjunction *para*, which is often challenging to translate. It can carry a great number of meanings. When connected with the dative case of a person, as it is here with God, it typically indicates that something is done either in the immediate vicinity of someone, or (metaphorically) in his mind, **near by, beside, in the power of, in the presence of, with**. So, if that is Peter's meaning, he is saying that you are operating in the power and the presence of God to manifest His grace when you do good and

endure suffering for it. Paul says this is the mind of Christ, which we are to have in ourselves. The mind of Christ can be the same mind that we possess as believers, and that is exactly what Peter is calling upon slaves suffering unjustly to take hold of. Peter then goes even further to declare that this is the calling God has placed upon every Christian.

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. (1 Peter 2:21)

Notice what the calling is founded upon. It is because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example. Here we are face-to-face with the hardest teaching the Bible has for us. Not only were the sufferings of Christ the source of your salvation, they were also the example in which you are now to walk. If you serve Jesus Christ as your Lord, you are serving the One who suffered though He did not deserve it.

Here is where the glorious reality of the gospel comes in for the Christian. Look at Romans 6:23. **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 6:23b)** Now, think about that statement in this way. When Jesus died, He wasn't paying His own debt. He was indebted to no one, not even to His Father in heaven. He had no sin. His death was grace, it was the *charisma*, the free gift of God, through which eternal life is granted to us who were debtors to sin. That is why He was raised in glory, as the firstborn from among the dead. He freely offered Himself to die not as wages for His own sin, but as the wages for ours. All of this is exactly what Peter lays out for us at the close of this chapter in what may be the most beautiful description of Jesus' sufferings anywhere to be found. What is the example of Jesus, which we are called to follow?

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. 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. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Peter 2:22-25)

We are called in Christ not to suffer for wrongdoing, but to suffer for doing good. We are called to live a life that is so pure and unstained by sin that when we are punished it is grace being poured out upon our punishers. Those who punish us don't deserve to punish us. They don't deserve to reproach us and slander us and treat us the way they do, and yet we endure for the sake of the One who has already endured in our place. There can be nothing higher than this in the Christian life. Nothing requires more power and strength from the Lord than just this. There is no greater display of the power of God on this earth than the unjust sufferings of his saints, which they endure for His sake. To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps.

This is grace. This is how we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. This is counter-cultural. This is the truth that can flip this broken world upside-down, and bring about revival in our land. If we

really want to see revival, it is not going to be through revolution, but through the revelation of Jesus Christ. He is the One who frees us from our bitterness and resentment against those who wrong us. He is the One who forgives us, so that we can have the power to forgive. We are going to have to hit our knees and pray for the strength to endure the hostility of this world as those who have not deserved it. Let us not do anything to deserve our sufferings. Let our conduct be pure so that when we suffer, it will be grace in the sight of God. Let's pray.