



The Christian and Unjust Suffering **1 Peter 2:18-25**

Let me invite you to 1 Peter chapter 2 today as we continue in our series through 1 Peter.

To remind you, after the four gospels' accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the New Testament tells the story of how the gospel, the good news of Jesus, advanced towards the ends of the known world.

In fact, Paul in writing to the church in Colossae described this in the opening of his letter.

Col. 1:5b-6

5b...Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, **6** which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth

Through the faithful evangelism of Christ followers, the gospel had reached towns, villages, and cities all over the Roman Empire. And as it did that it also reached every level of society in the Empire.

The elites of society, the wealthy, like Lydia in Philippi, had come to know Christ. And especially those on the margins of society and those who were at the bottom of society had come to believe in Jesus as well. And so as the church grew, the apostles and their followers were tasked with teaching and leading these new believers to faithful lives whatever their station in life might be. The truth was the same for all, no matter if you were rich or poor, the gospel that everyone needs changes lives. Belief in the gospel brings about change in behavior and that is shown in every relationship we have. The gospel impacts the way we relate to other believers and it impacts the way we relate to nonbelievers.

If you remember the call for these exiles that shapes this portion of the letter we are in, Peter writes back in verse 11...

1 Peter 2:11-12

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.

And last week we were reminded that submission and respect is the default position of the Christian towards “every human institution” that wields authority, Peter first applying this to our relationship with the government.

But, our next passage continues with this theme with some words that might sound very difficult for our modern ears to hear, but nonetheless continue this instruction for how followers of Jesus keep their conduct honorable among nonbelievers with the goal of glorifying the Lord.

1 Peter 2:18-25

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.

Peter now moves into giving instruction to servants who endure suffering under unjust masters. And a quick read through of this text leads to a ton of questions doesn't it? Questions about how servanthood and slavery is viewed in the Bible. And questions about enduring suffering as a Christian and if that is expected for us today in all situations. So there are a lot of questions to be considered from this passage.

Historical-Cultural Context

But first, we need to be careful of a common mistake we make when we read Scripture. When we read a passage of Scripture we want to figure out how to apply it to our lives, which is good and right. We believe the Bible is for our understanding but also for our changing. We want to not only know Scripture, we want to apply it. However, we make a mistake when we rush too quickly to application.

We need to do a little thinking before we simply try to apply passages. We need to consider, among other things, what we call the historical-cultural context of the passage we are reading. These verses were written to real people in a real place at a very different time than ours. So faithful interpretation and application begins with us considering the differences between, in this case, the first century Greco-Roman world and 21st century Rochester, NY.

When we better grasp the cultural setting in which these words were written, the meaning becomes more plain and the application to our lives more faithful to the intention of the author.

And the first thing we need to wrestle with is that in this passage, Peter is addressing “servants.” These are slaves. And no doubt, this topic is incredibly difficult for us to think through and wrestle with today. We continue today to wrestle with our past as a country and wrestle with the continued effects of that past today. But again, before we jump to applying this passage to that, we need to consider the world of the text. Again, this was a real situation in the first century Roman Empire that had to be dealt with. Slaves were becoming Christians, so the pressing question was how should their new faith shape the way they relate to others, specifically here, their Masters.

And it’s important to understand this was not a relationship that was on the margins of society. It’s not as if this was happening in the back alleys in Rome. The Master/Slave relationship was massively important in the structure of the culture at the time. It’s been estimated that there were as many as 60 million slaves at the time of Peter’s writing. And the truth is, their experiences varied greatly.¹

There are a few Gr. words used in the NT that refers to a slave, but the Gr. word used here, has at its root the word for the home. In other words, these were household servants. Historically, some household slaves were very well educated, served as teachers and even doctors, some were considered members of the family unit - this is why this dealt with right before the next passage on husbands and wives.

However, we don’t want to paint too nice of a picture here, many were treated very harshly. Peter is acknowledging the very real potential of being beaten for doing good. Slave were viewed as property with no rights whatsoever, the Master could treat their property any way that they wished. Aristotle, had observed the idea and belief that no true injustice could be done to a slave.

And so, again how should slaves, those who particularly were suffering at the hands of harsh masters, how should they respond to their condition? Peter says to obey with respect.

Now, before we walk through the text and wrestle with Peter’s words here, I think it’s important that I say a quick word about the idea of slavery and the Bible. The Bible, at times, has been accused of promoting and defending slavery mainly because of passages like this one. In times not that long ago in our own country, passages like these were used to defend the practice of slavery as a good thing, even a God-ordained institution.

¹ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.

But let me say that is completely and utterly wrong and wicked. The Bible, in actuality, promotes the dignity of every human life and condemns the idea of slavery.

But then we read that and we think, it doesn't sound like it. The modern question becomes, why weren't the New Testament authors more direct in condemning slavery? I think, that what needs to be understood is that though there was no single sweeping statement that directly called for the overthrow of the institution of slavery, the first century church sowed the seeds that so radically changed the relationships within that structure, that slavery would not practically exist.

I'll give you just a few examples, the first being the example of Philemon and Onesimus. If you remember, Onesimus is a slave who runs away from his master, Philemon. Onesimus hears the gospel and becomes a follower of Jesus and Paul instructs him to go back to Philemon to make things right. But here is the instruction to Philemon...

Philemon 1:15-16

15 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, **16** no longer as a bondservant but **more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother**—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Again, treat Onesimus not as a slave, but as a brother.

Just one other example among many...

Ephesians 6:5, 7-9

5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters...as to the Lord and not to man, **8** knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. **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.

Notice again, the call to masters - "do the same;" "stop threatening;" "knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven and that there is no partiality with him." In other words, you might be called Master in your role, but you aren't the ultimate Master. God is not impressed by your authority, he is not intimidated by your authority and you are called to submit to him.

So again, the master/slave relationship was so pervasive in the first century world that the entire socio-economic structure was built on, so the pressing question for these believers is not primarily how do we dismantle this in a world where Christians have absolutely no say in these things, but rather, how might slaves who now follow Jesus, how should they relate to their Masters, especially harsh and unjust Masters in way that "they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation"?

Now, with a little historical-cultural understanding, we can go back to the text, so look again...

1 Peter 2:18-20

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.

Amazingly, here is the call: Slave - show submission to and respect your master whether they are good or unjust.

And for us today, we obviously are not in the exact same situation. No one here is in the role of slave as they were in the first century. However, there is a principle here that applies to not only slaves of the first century, but all Christians in the first century, and ultimately all Christians in all times and all stations in life.

Christians are called to endure unjust suffering without taking vengeance into their own hands.

Now, how and when to apply that, is what makes this passage so difficult to read, so difficult to understand, and even more difficult to put into practice.

Oftentimes, passages that speak to servants in the NT are applied to the workplace of today. We are called to respond to our bosses in the same way a servant called to respond to their master. We are to respect them. We are to work heartily unto the Lord and not just for our boss. We are to work with integrity even if no one is watching. And those things are true, but the greater principle here is that there will be times in the Christian life when we suffer at the hands of others for no good reason at all. In fact, we will do good and we will be slandered. We will be mocked. We will be ridiculed. We will be marginalized. We might lose our jobs. We might lose the respect of others. We might even suffer physically, as many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world do - not because we've done something wrong, but because we did something right.

In fact, one example going back to the first century world, it was common practice for the servants of a household to worship the gods that the family and specifically the patriarch of the home worshipped. But what happens when that servant becomes a Christian? Well they no longer worship those gods, they worship the one true, living God, which is right, but they may suffer for it.

And so again, how does we as Christians respond, when we do what is good, right, and biblical, only to be met with hatred? Do we respond with vengeance? With

retaliation? No, Peter says with respect - even to those who unjustly cause pain and suffering.

SIDE NOTE

A quick side note before we go on with Peter's reasons why. A danger when teaching and preaching that we should endure unjust suffering without retaliation is that a message that isn't being preached might be heard.

I have in mind especially the wife who is suffering abuse at home or the one who has suffered abuse at the hands of a relative, teacher, or boss. I don't want you to hear from me or this passage that God wants you to suffer in silence. That the commendable thing is to endure because God has called you to this. That you shouldn't talk to someone or call the police. That is not the message of this passage or this church.

In fact, the passage previous to this is about the authority of the government in particular and the person who has abused you is called to submit to them as well, so call the police. Talk to one of the elders of the church. Get help and get out.

And this was even the message to servants in the first century. Obviously they didn't have as many rights and options as we do today but even they were encouraged to find freedom if possible from their situation.

Paul was writing about being content in any station of life we find ourselves, but notice even in that context his word to the slave...

1 Corinthians 7:20-21

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.)

Again, the message of the apostles even to slaves who were called to endure suffering was, if you can get out, get out! And the message is the same for you today. If you are suffering at the hands of an abuser, talk to someone, don't feel like God wants you to endure that in silence.

Again, don't hear what the Bible is not teaching.

Ok, back to the passage at hand. Peter not only calls servants, all Christians, to endure unjust suffering, he offers some reasons.

Why should the Christian endure unjust suffering without retaliation?

Again verse 19-20...

1 Peter 2:19-20

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.

2. Enduring unjust suffering is gracious and commendable.

Consider for a moment the opposite. Peter reasons, it is not commendable to endure suffering because you've done something to deserve it.

For example, many times I've seen Christians respond to culture or a specific person, online typically, with what might be truth, but it was wrapped in absolutely hateful speech and tone. When culture responds and calls you a jerk, you don't get to claim persecution there! Why? Because you were, in fact, a jerk.

However, when we do good, which includes loving our neighbors, even those we consider enemies, and we are met with hatefulness and derision, and then we continue to love our neighbors and pray for them, that, in God's eyes is a gracious thing. That is a good thing. That is a commendable thing.

So, beware of claiming some kind of badge of honor because you face opposition to your unChristlike attitudes and actions. On the other hand, know the Lord looks at your patient, Christlike attitudes and actions in spite of your opposition with great joy.

But look with me at other reasons why Christians ought to endure and can endure unjust suffering...

1 Peter 2:21

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.

Two reasons here in verse 21. First, because Christ died for you and second, because Christ is our example.

2. We endure unjust suffering because "Christ suffered for you" - v. 21a, 24

He is speaking about the substitutionary aspect of the gospel. That Christ went to the cross on your behalf. He explains more in verse 24...

1 Peter 2:24

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.

Again, Christ bore not his sins, but our sins. He died for us, in our place.

Well, how does Christ's death on the cross in the place of sinners enable us to endure unjust suffering without retaliation?

I think it's this: When we have tasted grace we are freed to extend it to others. I have to grasp the way in which God responded to me when I looked at him with dishonor. What did God ever do to deserve my rebellion? What did God ever do to deserve the ways in which my life by my sin mocked, ridiculed, and trampled on his word and his holiness? Nothing. So, how did he respond? With grace.

Rather than reviling me in return, rather than immediately swinging a sword in judgment, Jesus went to the cross for that sin. A sin that wasn't his, but mine. And because I've tasted that grace, a favor that I don't deserve, I can actually extend to others.

However, to try and respond this way without a clear view of the gospel is impossible. If we want to truly respond this way to those who mistreat us, we cannot think that our response to unjust suffering is part of some attempt to show ourselves good and holy before the Lord. Your salvation, my salvation, is not dependent on me being good enough, forcing myself to show respect where it is not due. If that is the case, I'll never do it. However, by the grace showed to us in the gospel, knowing that we are saved by faith alone, we are freed to show grace.

How do I not respond in like kind to those who slander me, dismiss me, cancel me, and even harm me? I remember that God didn't do that to me, even when I deserved it. Peter says, remember Christian servants, Christ died for you.

And second...

3. Christians endure unjust suffering because Christ is not only our gracious substitute, Christ is our example.

1 Peter 2:22-23

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.

Peter is referencing a very important passage in the Old Testament, a prophecy about the coming Messiah long before Jesus' life and death. It's a passage that is often described as the "Suffering Servant..."

Isaiah 53:3, 7-9

3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him

not...7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? 9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Peter here is saying, remember what Jesus endured? What did Jesus do when he suffered the greatest injustice in history? When the soldiers placed a purple robe on his shredded, bleeding back and pressed the crown of thorns onto his head while they laughed and ridiculed him, what did Jesus do? When Jesus hung on the cross and those who passed by mocked him, even when others who were crucified with him reviled him, what did Jesus do?

He did not revile in return, instead he prayed, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do."

How did he do that? Peter encourages us here, because he reminds us not just what Jesus did not do, he reminds us of what Jesus did do...

Jesus "continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

And this is massively important for us if we are truly going to endure unjust suffering the way Jesus did. We need to remember the fourth reason Peter offers here...

4. Christians can endure unjust suffering because we live under the watchful eye of a Shepherd and Overseer.

The reason why responding to our suffering in the way that Scripture calls us to is so difficult, is because it feels like it is only adding to the injustice. It doesn't fix it. It doesn't solve it. It feels like forgiveness and blessing is like glossing over the fact that a real wrong has been done, and so everything in us cries out for justice so much so that we take justice into our own hands.

But again look at what Jesus did. He entrusted himself to the judge. And the work "himself" there is actually not in the original Greek, so we could read that Jesus continued to entrust to him who judges justly. That trust we are called to extend is a wide net. We are called to entrust that person that has mistreated us, that specific situation we want retribution for, and ourselves to the true judge.

We read Romans 12 last week, but I want us to look at it again...

Romans 12:19-21

19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” **20** To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” **21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Understand, to endure unjust suffering, as Peter calls us to here, is not passive resignation. It is patient confidence in the one who stands as judge over all.

Again, it is so difficult to endure without retaliation because we feel like we are suffering alone. That there is no one we feel can and will stand up for us. Few people, maybe no other person, knows what we are enduring, but God knows. You are not alone in your suffering. Not a single injustice that you’ve endured or will endure will go unseen by the Sovereign Judge of all. And we know that in the end, there will not be a single injustice unaccounted for. They will either be paid for by Jesus or by the perpetrator.

But in the meantime, we turn to our Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

CONCLUSION

Though we don’t find ourselves in the exact same situation as the original audience Peter’s letter, it is still a timely word for us today. More and more, the discussion about our culture centers on the fact that there is a growing divide between ideals and hopes. And where there is disagreement more and more we see the biting, hatred, and destruction, making reconciliation harder to hope for. And the great hypocrisy is that Christians who despise the division often contribute to it. We do it with our mocking words and tones, we do it with our hateful attitudes towards those who disagree with us. Christians, in thinking they are helping, end up just adding to the problem.

However, we don’t have to. By the grace of God in the gospel, we break the cycle of the back and forth hatefulness, when we respond not with reviling and slander, but with *gracious* truth. Though total vindication might not happen today, or even soon, we can entrust ourselves, our situations, our opponents to the One who judges justly. He is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

VERSES

Colossians 1:5b-6

1 Peter 2:11-12

1 Peter 2:18-25

Philemon 1:15-16

Ephesians 6:5, 7-9

1 Peter 2:18-20

1 Corinthians 7:20-21

1 Peter 2:19-20
1 Peter 2:21
1 Peter 2:24
1 Peter 2:22-23
Isaiah 53:3, 7-9
Romans 12:19-21

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you answer the charge against the Bible that it promotes slavery?
2. Have you ever experienced unjust suffering for doing good? Specifically for your faith in Christ?
3. Why is it so hard for us to not retaliate when we are wronged?
4. How does the gospel encourage us to endure unjust suffering?
5. How does remembering that Jesus is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls encourage us to endure unjust suffering?
6. Spend some time praying that we as believers might respond to the world as Jesus did with the hopes that God is glorified in our circumstances.