

Do you want to follow Jesus? I mean truly follow Jesus? That's a question you wouldn't be surprised to hear at a church, and it's a question most of us would quickly answer in the affirmative. But, then again, maybe not. After the events of this past week, it may be one that gives us some pause.

Last Sunday was the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Gary told you of a group of Coptic Christians who died at the hands of ISIS and listed far away countries where the Church is persecuted regularly. But around the start of our 11:00 service, the blood of the martyrs did not run in some distant land, it ran in Sutherland Springs, TX. A militant, anti-Christian atheist entered the First Baptist Church and took the lives of 26 men, women, and children, and injured a couple dozen more. The suffering of brothers and sisters in Christ came home.

There are terrible stories in the news every day, and while they sadden me and remind me that we are in a broken world, few rocked me to my core like this one. Maybe it's because of my new role. Maybe it's because it happened so close to home. Or maybe I had just had enough, but it hurt. And then I had to prepare for this message. It was one I knew was coming for the last several months, and one I was already preparing for. But the central verse in this passage took on new meaning for me in light of those events.

[1 Peter 2:21] 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.

We have been talking a lot about calling over the last couple years, but this may be a call we're not so eager to answer. I'm convinced the timing of the today's passage is no accident. The passage is always challenging but, given what happened in Sutherland Springs, what we are going to talk about today is extremely difficult. Before last Sunday, I was prepared to give you some eloquent treatise on the theology of suffering. While my words would have been true, the heart of the message may have come across as theoretical or as a concern for Christians on the other side of the world because living out our faith has been relatively easy for most of us. You probably would have said "that's nice" and left the church as you normally do, and I couldn't blame you if you did. But all that's changed. I don't really care about eloquence anymore, because I've been in a wrestling match all week; wrestling with God, wrestling with his Word, and wrestling with the brokenness of this world. So I want to invite you to wrestle with me today. Wrestle with what this passage is telling us, and if you know it, look at it with fresh eyes.

To truly take in this passage, we have to be real honest about how we look at suffering. The idea of suffering is viewed more and more incompatible with our culture. We want to pass a law, take a pill, or exist in a safe space to alleviate any suffering in our lives. I even read a story this week about a college professor who had the audacity to tell his students that, if they had any hope of passing his very difficult class, they were going to have to study hard and avoid partying. He was accused by student organizations and university officials of "frightening impressionable undergrads". Our intolerance for suffering has actually morphed into an insistence to eradicate really anything that is unpleasant in our lives, and the idea that it might come because of our faith is just more than some of us can handle. **But here's the risk for Christians: the boundaries we establish to avoid suffering can become barriers to intimacy with God.**

If we are going to follow Jesus and model our lives after his, a quick review of his life shows us the avoidance of suffering is likely impossible. He was poor, he was misunderstood, he was a man of sorrows, he was rejected, he was persecuted, he was condemned, and he ultimately died as a criminal. He is known as the Suffering Servant. Additionally, Jesus told his disciples: **(John 15:18-19) ¹⁸ “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.**

That’s what we are called to. So let me ask my question again. Do you want to follow Jesus? Keep that question in mind as we look at the second of three commands that stem from what we read last week.

[1 Peter 2:13a] ¹³ Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.

Peter continues his call for followers of Christ to live a life of submission. The reason for submission is what should be our overriding motivation to do so: it is for the Lord’s sake. God’s agenda is far more important than our personal agenda. God’s agenda is far more important than my rights. God’s agenda is more powerful than the agenda of any human institution.

[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.

What the ESV translates “servants” actually means “household slaves”. When we hear the word “slaves”, most of us immediately think of the horrific and evil system that imported black Africans to America, established for the sole benefit of white merchants and farmers. That’s not what was happening in the Roman Empire. Slaves made up approximately 1/3 of the Roman population. These people were indentured servants who often sold themselves into bondage for the sake of paying off debt, were of a lower class unable to make a living to care for themselves or their families, or were prisoners of war whose choice was death or servitude. Many slaves were educated and worked as doctors, teachers, musicians, and stewards, and were often loved and trusted members of a household. Slaves were also able to purchase their own freedom.

But this system was also corrupt. Slaves were at the bottom of the sociopolitical hierarchy. They were considered property, and their children, if born while slaves, were the property of their master. As property, the concept and means of justice were not applied to them, and many were abused by their masters. And for followers of Christ, their new primary allegiance to Jesus could have been perceived as a threat to their masters and result in unjust suffering. So how should they respond?

It is likely that some converted slaves thought their freedom in Christ meant freedom in world. That caused problems for themselves and the churches to which they belonged, and Peter is correcting their actions. Some have falsely claimed this is tacit endorsement for slavery, but it’s not. Peter elevates the worth of slaves by referring to them as moral beings who can be treated

unjustly, but he's not giving them license to demand justice. Our tendency is to fight back and demand our rights, but that is the response of the kingdom of man. Peter is calling his readers to something more. They are to live responsibly in society by submitting to their masters whether they are good or unjust (skolios), and if they are treated unjustly, they are called to endure it.

The motivation and ability to endure come when we are mindful of God. It keeps us focused on submitting "for the sake of the Lord", and helps us persevere by relying on God's presence and power, which he promises to all who follow him.

The result of enduring is two-fold. **Credit:** We get no credit if we suffer for our sin. But if we do what is right and suffer for it, that act of obedience finds favor with God. If you gave people a choice to do good and receive a reward now or do good and receive injustice now, most would go for the reward. Peter's challenge is to do good, even if means suffering for it. Jesus said **"¹¹ Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.** (MT 5:11-12) There may not be a reward now, but there will be an eternal reward for those who faithfully endure suffering.

Impact: Remember back in 2:12 Peter said, **"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."** If the slaves of Peter's day rose up and revolted against their society and the human institution of slavery, they may have been dismissed as another troublesome group with weird beliefs, or they may have been snuffed out by Roman authorities. Either way, their impact would have been negligible. That's why Peter calls them to a different, and much more impactful, response.

The call to follow the crucified Messiah was, in the long run, much more effective in changing the unjust political, economic, and familial structures than direct exhortations to revolutionize them would ever have been. For an allegiance to the crucified Messiah—indeed, worship of a crucified God—is an eminently political act that subverts a politics of dominion at its very core. —Miroslav Volf

Their singular focus on God's glory, their submission for the Lord's sake, and their enduring of unjust suffering, began to shine a light on the injustices of the world and draw others to the one true God. Someone enduring suffering is attractive. It's why we celebrate our Veterans this weekend, our brothers and sisters who endure suffering for a cause greater than themselves.

While we may not have to navigate life as a slave, Peter's instruction can be applied to any circumstance that brings unjust suffering. In the workplace. In our neighborhoods. In our schools. And, now, even when we are at church. We are faced with the same challenge of how to respond. Our instinct may be to retaliate or retreat. To consider ourselves at war with the culture, or inclined to remove ourselves from it completely. To think we're just one political candidate away from making it all right, or that we simply need to acquiesce. But all of those responses fall short.

Does this mean we should not bother being involved in the political process? No. Does this mean we should not confront injustice? No. **We can't look for answers from the kingdom of man to**

problems that can only be solved by the kingdom of God. We too, like those slaves, must follow and worship the crucified Messiah and make, as our first priority, the glory of God. But here's the hard part. If we live sold out for God, resistance is inevitable...

[1 Peter 2:21-23] 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.

We may read that passage and understandably ask the question, "Why?" The answer: because Jesus did. That may sound simplistic, but it's true. Peter quotes from Isaiah 53 to show his readers that Jesus is the Suffering Servant prophesied in the Old Testament. He had to suffer and, as followers of his, we will suffer too. To this you have been called.

Peter says he is our example. He uses a word that refers to a writing or drawing a student would trace or copy. Back when they taught cursive in school, the cursive alphabet would often hang as a banner in the classroom, or the practice pages would include dashed cursive letters for a student to trace. I used to love those things because I have terrible handwriting. This is more than just a general call to follow Jesus, it's a call to emulate him as our model. **If you walk in the footsteps of Jesus, you inevitably end up at the Cross.** Jesus says to follow him you must pick up your Cross. To this you have been called.

Peter tells us Jesus lived a sinless life. If it's true that doing good and living obediently results in prosperity, Jesus would have been the richest man alive. But doing good does not inoculate us from suffering. We often read that Jesus suffered *despite* the fact that he lived a sinless life, and that's true. It's what made his suffering unjust. But I would also suggest he suffered *because* he lived a sinless life. Jesus was the ultimate exile, and he lived in a way so counter to the world that he suffered for it. When we live as the world lives, we won't stand out, we won't suffer for our faith, but we won't have an impact for God. But if we follow the example of Jesus, if we walk in his steps and live in obedience to God, we will surely stand out, and we can expect unjust suffering to come as a result of that. To this you have been called.

Jesus responds to suffering in two ways. First, in submission to the earthly institutions for the sake of the Lord. He didn't retaliate. He didn't play his God Card. One of my favorite scenes in the Bible is in John 18 when they come to arrest him, Jesus says "whom do you seek?", they answer "Jesus of Nazareth", he answers "I Am", and they all drew back and fell to the ground. Translation: I could crush you. You are not taking my life. I am giving it freely. He submitted. If there's anyone who could appreciate how Jesus responded to unjust suffering, it's the guy who cut off a soldier's ear when they came to arrest him.

So Jesus submitted, and he continued entrusting himself to the one who judges justly, the Father. If Jesus is our example in that we must suffer, he's also our example in how we suffer, and I want to give you a few ways in how we may do that. We follow the example of Jesus and entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly when we:

Make the glory of God the priority of your life. (John 6:38) “³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” Jesus had a single agenda and that was to be all about the Father. He could have fought for his rights, he could have rejected the Cross, he could have made much of himself, but he didn’t. “Not my will, but your will be done.” He submitted himself to the will of the Father, for the glory of the Father, and for the fulfillment of his plan. We should follow his example and submit our entire lives to him.

Stay close to the Shepherd. In times of suffering, and particularly when he knew his Passion was at hand, Jesus’ instinct was to pray to his Father. If that’s his instinct, it should be ours too. When you heard the news from Sutherland Springs, was your first instinct to put your face in the dirt and beseech God to overwhelm those people with his mercy and peace and to eradicate evil on this earth? Proximity breeds confidence and peace. The closer we are to God, the more we can entrust ourselves to him and endure unjust suffering.

Trust that God has your back. Jesus knew the character of his Father and the promise made in Deuteronomy 32 “Vengeance is mine...the Lord will vindicate his people.” He could submit to injustice and suffering because he knew God would one day judge his enemies. This is a tough one. If you demand justice when you have suffered for your faith, you pit yourself against the very world you’re supposed to be influencing for Christ. Submission is letting go of the justice you feel you are due and trusting God to handle it.

Rest in your eternal hope. Peter could have been really unkind and started his letter with this news of certain suffering. “To the elect exiles of the Dispersion...you’re hosed!” But he didn’t. Peter began by reminding his readers of the glorious and majestic salvation they have in Christ and the eternity that awaits them. Jesus knew the plan God had and it propelled him to endure the suffering of the Cross. We too know, with certainty, what our future holds, and are able to endure suffering because of it.

Trust that God redeems suffering for his purposes. This would be the most discouraging sermon you’ve ever heard if my message was simply, “You’re going to suffer. Deal with it.” But we worship the God of redemption who is making all things new. Here’s how Peter closes out this section.

[1 Peter 2:24-25] 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.

The suffering of Jesus was for nothing less than the salvation of our souls. Through his suffering, we have been freed from the penalty and power of sin and given a new life to live for him and according to his example. And just as the suffering of Jesus is redeemed for the glory of God, so too will our suffering be redeemed for our benefit and God’s glory.

Suffering is part of God’s plan. His Son had to go through it, and so must we. I wish I could tell you otherwise, but Scripture, and the life of our Savior, don’t allow for that. But we can accept that difficult truth knowing that our God is good and our suffering is not in vain. So let me ask you one final time: Do you want to follow Jesus?