

1 Peter

Entrusting
Ourselves
to a
Faithful
Sovereign



1 Peter 2:18-25

Thorns, Thistles, and the Gospel

This morning I'd like us to get straight into the text and look at it within its contexts. This text includes a delicate topic that can easily sidetrack us from the deep and beautiful Christology and ethics that is the focus of our text. The suffering of Christ and His life in us is the basis of ethics for the Christian. Because Jesus always sought to do the will of the Father, including in His suffering, so we are to seek to love God and do His will for us in every area of our lives.

18 Household slaves, submit to your masters with all reverence not only to the good and gentle ones but also to the cruel.

**19 For it brings favor if, because
of a consciousness of God,
someone endures grief from
suffering unjustly.**

**20 For what credit is there if
when you do wrong and are
beaten, you endure it? But when
you do what is good and suffer,
if you endure it, this brings favor
with God.**

**21 For you were called to this,
because Christ also suffered for
you, leaving you an example,
that you should follow in his
steps.**

**22 He did not commit sin, and
no deceit was found in his
mouth; 23 when he was
insulted, he did not insult in
return;**

**when he suffered, he did not
threaten but entrusted himself
to the one who judges justly.**

24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

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

The gospel shapes how we are to view ourselves and our work relationships, especially when we are unfairly mistreated.

The gospel shapes how we view ourselves and our work relationships, especially when we are mistreated by supervisors, coworkers, or peers.

Let's consider our contexts needed for understanding and applying today's passage.

First, let's address the elephant in the room. Peter addresses those Christians within the institution of slavery in the Roman empire. You can see that Peter doesn't outright condemn slavery. The NT does not at any point outright condemn it, but it does lay the foundation for viewing it as contrary to the gospel and for overturning that institution. Paul says in 1 Cor. 7,

17 Let each one live his life in the situation the Lord assigned when God called him. This is what I command in all the churches. . . . 20 Let each of you remain in the situation in which he was called. 21 Were you called while a slave? Don't let it concern you. But if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity. 22 For he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called as a free man is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of people. 24 Brothers and sisters, each person is to remain with God in the situation in which he was called.

The shared witness of the NT is that the Christian should avoid being enslaved by anyone or anything except being enslaved to the Lord and to righteousness. If Christians should avoid being enslaved, they also should not support slavery by attempting to own anyone else.

But what if you are enslaved as a Christian? You should not view yourself as a slave but as Christ Jesus's freed man. So the goal for Christian slave's life wasn't first and foremost to get one's freedom but to express one's freedom to live for Christ with joy in any life circumstance.

Now, if you read Peter's first two verses within their historical context, you'll find that Peter is actually elevating the self-perspective of those Christians serving as slaves. First, we need to understand slavery within the Roman empire. We have a tendency to interpret the same word used then in the same way as we understand it from the

centuries of slavery in America. Both institutions held that a slave's master had rights over the former, but the Roman version was closer to the idea of a work contract. Slavery was not isolated to a skin color or national ethnicity; rather, Roman slaves came from every region of the empire, including from the city of Rome. Those in Roman slavery were encouraged to pursue education, with many slaves becoming more educated than their masters. According to one historian, those serving as slaves would include the professional areas of store managers, accountants, medical physicians, teachers, personal secretaries, and sea captains. From my understanding, we have members who work in each one of those listed jobs. Some were even placed as heads over all the affairs of their master's house. Slaves could own property. In distinction from our nation's history, Roman slaves related to their masters as a creditor or a boss. Also, one could buy his way out of slavery with cooperation from his master and could even move on to high ranking governmental positions after manumission.

Slavery was a way for many to arise out of a lower social economic status with some security. It was seen as a foundational and acceptable aspect of Roman economy, but it was one that masters could abuse.

So, here's the second matter we need to understand in context. A master could abuse one's slaves, even though secular philosophers wrote against their mistreatment. Once you became a slave, Roman society no longer viewed you as being fully human. Because slaves were not seen as fully human, they were not seen as capable of moral expectation.

So when Peter writes, "submit to your masters with all reverence not only to the good and gentle ones but also to the cruel," Peter is showing that their humanity is restored in Christ beyond any political manumission their Roman master could provide.

If you are in Christ, your social and economic position has no bearing on your worth. All are equal in Christ as brothers and sisters. And every brother and sister in the Christian family is to see Christ as our own Shepherd, who leads and cares for us. We are to see ourselves as free in Christ to obey God regardless of what our mere human supervisors think of us. We are beautiful because of Christ, regardless of how our peers mock us in their sinful ignorance.

So, please understand, Peter is not condoning slavery. Rather, he is letting us know that we are able to serve faithfully as unto the Lord in our work environment, even if we have rude or persecuting supervisors or coworkers. The Christian who is focused on the Lord does not base her identity in her immediate circumstances or career advancement. Rather, Christ is her life.

This invisible abolition of the heart is more subversive to oppressive regimes than any direct confrontation can have. You cannot stop the word of Christ with physical aggression. You cannot surgically remove the Spirit with threats of force. There is no power at the hands of the dead able to extinguish the life of Christ in the believer. Tears may come from suffering at the hands of unbelievers, but may the Lord use them to wash away our desires for the world's affections and world's approval and make us to long for our heavenly master all the more.

If you must suffer unjustly in your work environment, see this opportunity as God's grace to identify with Jesus more intimately.

If you must suffer unjustly at the hands of a supervisor, see this opportunity as God's grace to identify with Jesus more intimately.

A second context that we must consider with our passage is the context of the fall. Genesis teaches us that we were made in the image of God and that everything was good. We enjoyed fellowship with God and the rest of the created order. Humanity dwelt with each other in unity and in health, both collectively and as individuals. The world and society were flourishing, even if it was just the beginning. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they fractured everything. They fractured our relationship with God, with the created order, with each other, and even within ourselves. So God judged Adam and Eve in their sin but only cursed the serpent that tempted them and the ground that man was supposed to work.

God said:

The ground is cursed because of you.

You will eat from it by means of painful labor
all the days of your life.

18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

19 You will eat bread by the sweat of your brow
until you return to the ground,
since you were taken from it.

Work is not the curse of the fall, no matter how much a child may complain about having to work. The curse of the fall is the difficulty that is now tied to our work. Adam worked before the serpent tempted Eve. He was to work and keep the garden, overseeing and caring for all within it, shaping all the creation around him for God's glory,

mankind's good, and the flourishing of the earth. And it responded to his hand with joy. The animals approached Adam peacefully and gladly, with his reign over them demonstrated through his role in naming them.

But then that deadly trap ensnared the man and woman. And since then our work has been toilsome. Both the gathering of sustenance and the advancement in professional skill come with difficulty.

When we are able to find a career that thrills with all its facets, we experience part of what Adam enjoyed and anticipate what service will be like in Christ's consummated kingdom. But in the now and not yet, we still experience the thorns and thistles of the fall, even in careers that we enjoy. Also, sin's consequences for our work includes hostile working relationships.

If you have a work supervisor that is lenient, supportive, and provides encouraging opportunities for you to advance in skill, education, and character, then praise God for his kindness in this regard. If you have a supervisor that is harsh, unfairly critical, and demeaning for no reason, then Peter says to you, "Praise God for this grace available to you."

How is it a matter of grace for you to have a harsh and demeaning supervisor within your work environment? Or to have coworkers and peers who mock and belittle you? I have memories of three different supervisors who treated me unfairly with either what they did or how they did it, all attempting to demean and question my very dignity as a human being. How is their mistreatment to be seen as an opportunity to experience grace?

We often see anything that is painful as necessarily undesirable. While pain is not something we should go looking for, pain itself is amoral. It is neither good nor bad; rather, pain is a signal, a signal that something is not how it should be. The pain that you experience when those in your work environment mistreat you for your beliefs or background for no justifiable reason, your pain is telling you that your experience is not consistent with the original creation.

But your experience lines up with the head of new creation.

When you suffer unjustly at the hands of others, you have an opportunity to look to Jesus. You get to look to the eyes of our Savior and ask, "Is this what you endured?" "Yes, my brother. Yes, my sister. More than you can ever experience, but I recognize every injury they lob against you. I feel their every attempt to embarrass you. I know what it is like to be isolated, mocked, and slapped for standing for truth. Yes, you are tasting what I unjustly endured."

When your boss or supervisor asks you to compromise your Christian ethics or else you face their unjust wrath, you are able to look to Jesus's suffering for hope, purpose, and perseverance.

He was unlawfully arrested and tried disrespectfully after many went to sleep at night and was already being crucified when people were beginning their work day. On what evidence? Just that he implicitly affirmed that he was the Messiah.

When you go through such suffering unjustly as a Christian in your work or peer environment, you are invited by God to identify intimately with Jesus and experience what others do not get to experience. You get to look to Jesus and find out that He stands with you amidst your suffering, knowing what it is like to suffer unjustly in living according to God's will.

**Identifying intimately with
Jesus's suffering will solidify
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Identifying intimately with Jesus's suffering will solidify your affection for Christ as shepherd and conform your ethics more closely with His leadership.

We have already begun considering the third context needed for understanding today's passage. It is the life of Jesus. Jesus's sole concern was to do the Father's will. The pain of ultimate suffering occurred for Jesus on the cross, dying a death he did not deserve to die, and enduring the judgment of the Father for the sin of the world. But he endured the cross as an act of obedience to the Father.

he humbled himself by becoming obedient
to the point of death—
even to death on a cross.

He endured the judgment of the cross and the insults of sinful men in order to redeem you out of slavery to sin and death. Christ is the one who redeems your pain through his greater pain. Peter looks to Isaiah 53 to describe Jesus's suffering.

(Read Peter's rendition)

Peter is letting us know that the pain of this life only makes sense by looking to Jesus's suffering amidst our pain. And by looking to His suffering with eyes of faith, Jesus's suffering gives us freedom from the horrible taskmaster that is sin. His suffering frees us from resignation. His suffering moves us beyond our circumstances to look to Christ as our shepherd.

The shepherding image is not a haphazard title but was the paradigm of leadership in the ancient middle east. Because Jesus is the sinless one who died as a lamb, he can identify with us as sheep. But his sacrifice is different because it sets His people free.

Peter equates our healing by means of Jesus's stripes with living for righteousness. The healing we all need is from sin sickness, making us dead to sin but alive to God

and righteousness.

Have you ever heard someone say to someone else, “You’re dead to me?” Maybe you heard it on a movie, because it is very dramatic. But that is exactly what the Christian is

able to say now to sin. Sin, you are dead to me. Sin, you are dead to me because Christ died for me. And Peter is saying that if you have suffered unjustly like Jesus, you appreciate this truth even more than the Christian who has not experienced such suffering.

So if sin is dead to you, how should you live? Peter writes that you should trace the life of Jesus on the pages of your life. Do you remember first learning handwriting or teaching handwriting to a child? We’ve found it helpful to use dots or lines to form the letters. Then we have our daughters trace the letters on the basis of our sketch.

Peter uses this exact analogy to describe how you are to trace the life of Jesus for the pages of your life. God has given you a pattern to follow. He suffered not just for your salvation but also to give you an example so that you follow in his exact footsteps.

Hopefully, it will snow at some point this winter unlike last year. When we have had heavy snows, my family goes crazy, including my dog. She starts running around, jumping, and trying to snap at falling snowflakes. One of my favorite snow memories is leading my family to a good sledding hill. My daughters were walked after me, and I turned to see them using the imprints from my footsteps as places for their own footsteps.

When you go through suffering as a Christian and it wasn’t because of any wrongdoing on your part, you have have footsteps greater than your own showing you the trail to take.

When you faithfully identify Jesus through unjust suffering, the Spirit opens your eyes to appreciate the passion account even more. Jesus’s silence before the kangaroo court sounds forth in your heart with the echoes of triumph over sin. Jesus’s humble confidence when crucified lifts you up to trust God amidst difficulty. Jesus’s appeals to the Father mark out a path for you to follow when you have no other advocate.

May the Spirit of God use today’s passage to encourage your heart in your work relationships, especially the difficult ones. We were like sheep who were scattered. The Shepherd and Overseer of our souls has healed us and returned us to God and marked out the path of how we are to handle unjust treatment until we arrive home.