*Suffering Servants*

1 Peter 2:18-21

2/5/23

Last week we began to study the second major section of 1 Peter, where Peter applies the foundational principles for godly living given in the opening section to specific relationships and circumstances believers encounter. The first subject he tackled was our relationship to governing authorities. This was an important topic, given the context of persecution his original readers faced. Peter wanted them to honor God by maintaining a submissive demeanor towards the government even when being wronged by them.

Next, Peter tackles another important dynamic facing the 1st century church. It is the relationship of a servant towards their master. I have read estimates that 90% of the people living in the Roman Empire were considered slaves. Although that estimate is too high, there were more slaves in Rome and citizens. Slavery formed the backbone of their economy. Although their slavery system was different than the American system of the 18th and 19th centuries, it was not any more just. In the early days of the church, Christianity thrived among the slave class, so much so that it was seen to be the religion of slaves.

Before we look at this text, we do need to say a word about slavery, especially since there are some who accuse the bible of endorsing slavery. This is not the first time we have encountered this issue in our study of God’s word. We looked at it in Colossians too. When we did, I commented that, just because the Bible instructs someone on how to act in a certain context, it does not mean that it prescribes that context as God’s ideal. For example, Dt. 21 instructs a man on how he is to behave towards his wives when he has more than one of them. Yet the bible is also clear that God’s design for marriage is for one man and one woman to maintain a life-long covenant relationship with one another. Polygamy is sin. Yet God, in His graciousness, instructs those who have departed from His ideal on how they are to live in their less-than-ideal circumstance.

This is how we should view the issue of slavery. Any system of slavery, whether the 1st century Roman system or the slavery of the 18th-19th centuries in the American south, is sin. It is good and right when God’s people use their influence to end such injustices. Yet the 1st century slave had no hope of ending slavery, and few if any prospects of gaining personal freedom. So God, in His kindness, instructed them on how the gospel was to shape their behavior in their less than ideal circumstance. So our text is not an endorsement of slavery. It simply instructs those who find themselves in the condition of slavery on how they are to honor Christ in their circumstance.

Peter’s instruction comes in the form of a simple command: servants, *be submissive to your masters with all respect.* In the same way Christians are to submit to every human institution, servants are to submit to their masters. Last week we defined submission as *willingly bringing yourself under the authority of another*. This is a challenging concept for the American psyche. Slavery is unjust. Those who engage in it are sinning against God and their fellow man. As we will observe in a moment, many who owned slaves extended that injustice even further by treating their slaves unreasonably. To the American mind, such tyranny justifies insubordination or even requires open opposition. Yet Peter says that even in the case of an unreasonable master, a servant was to remain submissive. Submission was to be visible in the respect they showed.

Here we must remind ourselves that submission is an attitude, not an action. Submission does not mean we comply when wrong is demanded of us by an authority in our lives. But it does mean that, if we must disobey them, we do so in a way that recognizes and respects their authority. Submission is a condition of the heart.

Second, notice that the heart-condition of submission is not rooted in circumstances. We see this in the second half of vs. 18. Servants were to submit to their masters in all respect, not only when they are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. The respectability of an authority does not determine our demeanor towards them. This is why, when Daniel and Darius are interacting after Daniel has spent the night in the lion’s den, Daniel is careful to communicate two things: 1) That God saved him and 2) he had done no crime against the king. Darius had established an unjust law with an unreasonable consequence. Daniel had disobeyed and suffered the consequences. Yet, he maintained his attitude of submission. Instead of reviling the king for his wickedness, he pointed the king towards God and reassured him that he had nothing to fear from Daniel. This is submission in the face of injustice.

Last week we looked at Peter’s command to submit to a wicked emperor. This week’s text calls servants to submit to their masters despite the basic injustice of slavery and the unreasonableness of an evil master. What I hope we are learning is that submission is a disposition of the heart that is not rooted in our circumstances. Submission must be rooted in our desire to please God and represent Him well in the world.

This is our third observation. Servants were to submit to their masters even when mistreated because this finds favor with God. Vs. 19 says we do this for the sake of conscience toward God. This is the key to experiencing victory in our pursuit of holiness. Fear of consequences can be a powerful motivator to good behavior for short seasons of time. Eventually, fear of consequences is not enough to keep us from sin. At some point, our desire to please God and to express our love for Him must become the chief motivation for obedience. A sense of duty cannot produce the heart disposition Peter is calling us to. It may keep our outward behavior appropriate; but it will not liberate our hearts to live in the freedom Christ has given us. Eventually love for God must take over to keep us obedient. Our conscience’s desire to please God must become the basis of our actions.

Only a true love for God and desire to please Him can keep us submissive when suffering unjustly. When we focus on the injustice of our circumstances, we are unlikely to weather the storm of suffering well. But when we shift our focus from ourselves onto God and His glory, then we can count it all joy to face various trials. When we do what is right in the face of ill-treatment, this finds favor with God. We will be rewarded in eternity for bearing up under injustice.

Vs. 20 caries this principle further when it asks *what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.* Bearing up under discipline for mistakes made, is no accomplishment. That is simply enduring fair consequences for failed actions. But when you suffer unjustly for having done what is right and patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.

As I reflected on the principle being taught here, my mind rolled over several circumstances from my former ministry context. I thought of times when I made mistakes that hurt and offended people. In those times, it was easy to remain quiet in the face of criticism and receive words of correction, because I knew I deserved them. But then there were times when people got upset when I had done nothing wrong. I thought specifically of an individual who took a severe disliking to me. He began to create problems, to raise false accusations, and purposefully undermine me in the congregation and with the leadership. As this strung along for years, there were multiple times I was corrected by the church leadership for things I had not done. In those moments, everything in me wanted to fight back and to vindicate myself. I wanted to prove my innocence and for everyone to know that I was being wronged; more than that, I wanted this man’s evil to be exposed, not because I desired his sanctification, but because I wanted everyone to see who he truly was. Yet the bible says that when we patiently endure suffering because we did what was right, God sees and knows. On the day when He squares all wrongs and vindicates His people, He will reward us for having patiently endured such injustices while pointing people to Christ.

As we come to the close of our mediation today, we need to ask *what does this have to do with us?* After all, none of us are slaves serving an earthly master. On one hand, we can use this text to inform the relationship between employees and employers in our economic context. That is a legitimate application of the text. Thankfully, we live in a social and economic environment that, if we have a tyrant for a boss, we are free to find different employment. Peter’s original readers did not enjoy this luxury. Yet as long as we are drawing a paycheck from our employer, we do need to work hard and willingly submit to those who are our bosses. Yet if we end our application there, I think we have missed the greater point of the text.

Ultimately our goal is to display the greatness and glory of Christ in all circumstances. This is why, in vs. 21, Peter directs us to the example of Christ. He suffered all manner of injustice so that He could redeem us from sin. We have been called for the same purpose; that in the face of suffering and mistreatment we might show people Christ’s glory and the power of His salvation. Jesus did not come into the world demanding His rights and requiring fair treatment. He came as a suffering servant to lay down His life for His sheep. He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. He endured ridicule, shame and mistreatment so that He could present you and me to His Father as holy and blameless people. When we are treated unjustly, we are to act in a way that points people to God. Those who mistreat us should smell the fragrance of Christ wafting from us. This is why the paragraph moves away from talking about the servant/master relationship to exploring the glory of Christ, who bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. Was it fair for Jesus to endure such mistreatment? To be reviled, shamefully treated, wrongly accused, and murdered? No! Yet through injustice of men, God executed His justice on our sin, making a way for us to be forgiven. Suffering well allows us to point people to the glory of Christ. To this grand theme we will return next week.

*The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord life up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.*