

First Peter: Suffering Servants

1 Peter 2:18-25

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

When we left the epistle of 1 Peter, the book of ethics for exiles, the apostle was in the middle of giving instructions on how we are to live in the world. These are Peter's inspired, social, political, cultural rules of engagement. He spoke of being subject to human institutions, to the Emperor and governors. In fact, he speaks of submission (or being subject) some five times in about 35 verses.

This submission implies no inferiority, rather it was, and is, the sign of truly free people. It is Jesus paying the temple tax to temple to authorities whom he has excoriated as being irredeemably corrupt, even murderous, who are seeking to kill him. The One who said that he would tear down and burn that temple – which he did in 70 AD – and rebuild it around his own crucified and risen body. To them – as a free man – he gives the tax. It is the outward manifestation of a deep inward liberation. Peter continues today, with two examples of costly, suffering submission. Two suffering servants. So, we will make two points: Slaves in verses 18-21, and Christ in verses 22-25. Slaves and Christ.

I. Slaves

First, then, slaves. A few preliminary remarks, because context is crucial here. For “slaves,” Peter uses the word for household servants. Which means there were probably a good number of such people in the churches to which he writes.

In addition, slavery in the Greco-Roman world, is not the same as the later race-based slavery in the Americas. *The Bible condemns (in 1 Timothy 1 and Revelation 18) any kind of kidnapping or trafficking in human souls.* These Christian slaves to whom Peter writes, would have become slaves either through war, or through poverty (selling themselves into servitude for security), or through birth. They could be well-educated, they could earn some money (manage estates), though most of them were poor, some would have had property. They could labor, and eventually gain their freedom. But while they were slaves, they lacked freedom and basic rights – and were essentially treated as property.

So, even the employer-employee relation is not a great parallel (though there is an analogy). This was a much lower estate than merely being an employee, free

to change jobs and the like. As we will see, these slaves were subject to corporal punishment, to beatings, for their offenses. Aristotle felt that, since they were property, it was not possible to mistreat them.

So, its important to remember a few things here. First, Peter is writing as a pastor to CHRISTIANS in this lowly state. He is not discoursing on Greco-Roman slavery in the abstract. He is writing to his flock. Second, there is no legal remedy or recourse for slaves with unreasonable masters, and Peter is trying to minimize their exposure to persecution and maximize their gospel witness. Third, this means that Peter is not endorsing of the institution of slavery. Even Greco-Roman slavery. He's just dealing with it as a reality, much the way you'd deal with polygamy, if you were evangelizing a culture which practiced that widely. It would be useless to merely pontificate against it, and impossible to simply abolish it.

What the gospel does, is transform people, to live in very difficult situations, while unleashing forces that can ultimately transform (or abolish) corrupt institutions. Gospel works very indirectly. With that, to the text! Verse 18: Slaves (again, household servants), be subject to your masters with all respect.

Now, even addressing slaves is a revolutionary thing. A conferral of dignity. They are spoken to as people, with agency. They are to submit THEMSELVES. It's an action that they are to take. They are not told to shut up and obey. They are told to "place themselves under" their masters. And not because masters are intrinsically superior. For all human persons equally bear the image of God. They are told do so out of reverent fear of God. Submission here is not weakness, or spineless conformity, or even political fate – it is an act of piety toward God. (ESV: with all respect)

And it is to be given, not only to good and gentle masters – going along with good, considerate leaders, or authorities, requires no particular nobility. *No! Submission is to be rendered even to those who are harsh. That's when hearts are revealed. So, while this text is, as we said, not about employer-employee relations, it is applicable to that situation.*

Who hasn't had a harsh, unreasonable boss? Submission in that case is, Peter says, especially commendable. Something which shows grace, something which is a pleasing aroma to God. Peter, who so deeply opposed Jesus' unjust suffering, is now the herald of the virtues of righteous suffering. Servants bear up because that are mindful of God, the text says. It is an ingrained, habitual, God-consciousness. *An interior life, which refers all things to God, and sees all things in the light of the Triune God.*

This God-consciousness is the interior freedom which enables one to transform suffering. It's the secret to all successful non-violent resistance.

The apostle continues in v.20 and says: if you receive a beating for sinning there's no virtue in that. Again – because it needs to be said – Peter is not accepting the situation, he's advising Christians who, for whatever reason, have to live in it. *In Ephesians, Paul forbids masters from even threatening (much less beating) household servants.* In any event, what is commendable, is suffering for doing good. As Psalm 34, puts it: Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. Or, summarizing from the teaching of Jesus himself, in the Sermon on the Mount:

²⁷ Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. (Peter is echoing his Lord here)

Then, v.21: Peter say: to THIS you were called. To what? To this unjust suffering, and to bearing up under it. *Submitting YOURSELF to it. This is a vocation Peter says, a calling, not resignation to blind fate.*

And it is so, because Christ suffered for you. Here is the towering instance of a suffering servant, the slave of all, bearing, submitting himself to, unjust suffering of the most vile and horrific kind. To an age constantly obsessed with its rights, with power and leverage, with counting and remembering and responding to slights, and with detecting offenses of every possible kind, of contesting for what one is due, of endless litigating, the cross can only seem like an absurdity. A kind of slave-mentality, maybe a form of masochism, but certainly beneath the dignity of a people who, IF they are going to serve, will do so only if their rights are respected.

Now, there is a lot to be said – and what there are various angles into the mystery of the atonement. But here Peter reminds us of an oft overlooked lesson. Namely, the atonement is an EXAMPLE to be followed. Not that we can atone for our own sins, nothing like that. Peter simply means that the cross is a moral school, an example. It is a lesson, indeed, it's the central lesson, in political science.

The word Peter uses for “example” here means: a sketch, or a pattern for the Christian life (Tracing letters of Alphabet). The cross is never merely “out there,” for Christians. It is the shape of our existence. Cruciformity is the way of life for the church. Whether slave or free, rich or poor, Jew or Greek, male or female.

So, we are to follow in his steps. Peter says, trace his footsteps, all the way to Calvary. Into participation in his unjust suffering, as the servant of all. And to that suffering of Christ, we now turn.

II. Christ

Here is the sketch, the connect the dots pattern, we are to walk in. Drawing on the portrait of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, Peter says: He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. Perfect innocence. Flawless, active obedience to the law of God. When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Non-violent, holy, and silent resistance, to the betrayal of Judas, to the false accusations of the priests, the cowardly injustice of Pilate, the bloodthirsty cries of the mob. (Flogging, spitting, beatings) Again, as the suffering slave of Isaiah 53:

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

Instead of retaliation, Jesus, who also was not a victim, but was fulfilling his vocation – entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He, who was unjustly given over, gave himself over to the judge of the world. Knowing that just vengeance was in the hands of his heavenly father. What a demanding bit of teaching for these early, powerless Christian slaves!

And yet, in THE Suffering Servant, we have a subjection so radical, that it signals the end of oppression, of dominating Lordship, of abusive authority, and of bondage and slavery in all its forms. THIS is real resistance! For this One is not MERELY an example – he is that – but his suffering is utterly unique, and does what no human suffering can do. Verse 24: He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross. This is unjust suffering at its most grotesque, and at its most glorious.

Not only suffering as innocent but suffering which bears the guilt and the shame of others. Bearing in his body, his full human nature, our sins, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. This spectacle of the cross, and our cruciformity, our union with the Crucified One by faith. THIS place is the mystery of human freedom, the wellspring of liberty. For unless we cut off and die to sin, and live for righteousness, we remain, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, we remain slaves, in the cruelest bondage. By his wounds – Peter continues – you have been healed. It's a familiar line. Again, from Isaiah 53. But its poignant here.

For Peter writes to beaten slaves, to battered servants, about another beaten servant. Only – because of who this is- these wounds are different. These wounds – try and catch the shock of this, as if you were hearing it for the first time – it is the WOUNDS of a beaten slave which are the source of your HEALING. What an absurd religion this must be! How could it ever get off the ground? (Stand up and defend yourself. Be a man)

In any event, the beaten slave, becomes the Great Physician, BY being wounded. What Isaiah foresaw, Peter witnessed with his eyes, and now writes about. And we need this scarred, wounded healer. Because we were like sheep going astray. He was like a sheep led to the slaughter. We were (as Peter once was) like sheep wandering from the fold. We need healing, healing which begins in earnest now, and which will come to completion at the resurrection. And in the gospel, this healing, this human reclamation projection, is underway in the Spirit.

But now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. The One who was led like a silent sheep to the slaughter, was and is, the Lord, our Shepherd. Christ is both standing slaughtered sheep, and sovereign Shepherd. If you want healing, you need to turn to (or return to) this Good Shepherd. He will do no wrong to your soul. He is also called the Overseer – the word means bishop, or watcher – of your soul.

THIS is the ultimate authority that household slaves are under. And THIS is who we are under, this is the One who we are reverently fearing, when we submit to (unreasonable) authorities. He who bore your sins in his body, now raised, is your pastor, your shepherd, the bishop, the watcher of your souls. And by his wounds, he continues to minister healing to your wounds.

So, without justifying the institution whatsoever, Peter, by means of the gospel, has transformed the status of those under unjust rule. Calling suffering servants to imitate THE suffering servant, whose wounds are the source of our wholeness. And in imitating the non-retaliating Christ, we imitate the mercy of the Father, who show kindness to the just and to the unjust. In this way, one overcomes evil – with good.

I will close with a story related by Edmund Clowney, former Prof. and President of WTS in Phila.) The story of a Korean Pastor: Yangwon Son. In 1948 in South Korea, a band of communists, took over his town, and executed his two older sons, Matthew and John. The boys died calling on their persecutors to believe the gospel. Later, a young man named Chai-sun, was identified as the one who actually fired the shots. And he was ordered to be executed. Pastor Son, again the father of the dead boys, requested that the charges be dropped, and that Chai-sun be released into his custody for adoption.

The dead boys had a 13 yo sister (Rachel), who testified in support of her father's request. The court then released Chai-sun, who became the son of this pastor, and a follower of Christ. Pastor Son said: I thank God that he has given me the love to seek to convert, and to adopt as my son, the enemy who killed my dear boys.

That is what cruciformity in the face of unjust suffering CAN look like. That is following in the steps of THE Suffering Servant. That is "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they do." (given up on the politics of vengeance and rights-

assertion) That is dying to sin, and living to righteousness. That is healing, flowing from the wounds of Christ. That is a pastor, reflecting the great Shepherd who was once a slaughtered sheep.

Are you suffering unjustly? Are you wounded? Peter will not coddle us here. But he will give us effective medicine. He says: you've been left an example – follow it. There are footsteps, walk in them. The shepherd and overseer of your souls has gone before you as a beaten slave. Return to him afresh. Let his wounds be the source of your consolation, your comfort, your healing. Amen.

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