

15 NOVEMBER 2020 – 9AM & SNC

GODLY SERVANTS [1 PETER 2:18-25]

The Elephant in the Room

For many of us, we are going to struggle to concentrate on what is going on in this passage until we first deal with the elephant in the room, and that is the issue of slavery in verses 18-19.

In this letter, Peter is writing from Rome during the reign of Nero, sometime in 62-63 AD, and addressing Christians in Roman provinces in Asia Minor, which is in modern-day Turkey. In Graeco-Roman culture, there were three classes of people: Roman Citizens (who had full rights and protection under the law), Freedmen (restricted protections, but a great deal of freedom) and the servant or slave class. This class of people were attached to households and contributed to the economy through a variety of professions and occupations, including as doctors, nurses, teachers, musicians, skilled artisans, agricultural workers, labourers, house-workers etc. Distinct from the trans-atlantic slave trade which was racially-based and permanent in nature, servants or slaves in the Roman world were from all walks, and had a greater potential for securing their freedom through the income they earned. Though at times brutal by its very nature, there was extensive Roman regulation governing the treatment of slaves in what was an accepted and central economic institution in the Roman Empire.

It's into this kind of a world that the gospel came, and unsurprisingly many slaves were won to faith in Christ. Naturally therefore, both Peter and Paul are concerned to help these young Christians take their next steps in maturity, to help them know how to honour Christ in their present circumstances. Their agenda was not to overthrow this economic institution, for this was simply not a feasible objective given the minority status of the church at this point, but simply to help God's people to know how to live in the variety of circumstances in which they found themselves when converted.

The Bible does not condone slavery. This passage does not condone slavery. Yet, if I can push the point even further, far from being complicit in slavery, the New Testament clearly plants the sorts of seeds necessary to unravel slavery as an institution. 1 Timothy 1:10 denounces enslavers as those gravely sinning. 1 Corinthians 7, though encouraging people to remain in their current walk of life when converted, encourages slaves to seek their freedom if it can be gained. Why? Because they are the Lord's freed person and belong to no one but God. In Paul's letter to Philemon he writes that the now converted Onesimus, is much more than a slave to his former owner but is in fact now a brother in Christ. In Ephesians 6, masters are not permitted to threaten their slaves, but must treat them the same way they expect to be treated. Why? Because they know who is their real master in heaven. These are but a few examples. Insisting that humans are equally made in the image of God and holding out that Christ frees us from our slavery to sin, it is unsurprising that as the gospel takes root, it undermines the institution of slavery.

There is more that could be said here, but hopefully that is enough to clear the air so that we can engage with the heart of what is going on in this passage.

The Cultural Context

So we've spoken a little bit about the economic context in which this fledgling church found itself in, but the entirety of 1 Peter reveals that culturally the church was suffering and oppressed. It was not easy to be a Christian in this pagan Roman society.

Yet as God's people, they have been reminded in 2:9 that they are to declare God's praises who called them out of darkness into his wonderful light. Yet this begs the question, how on earth were

they supposed to do this when under attack? How were they to respond as God's people and continue to declare his praises when they felt continually besieged?

Well Paul's battle plan for a besieged church is spelled out in 2:12, **Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.** He says again in 4:19, **So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.**

Glorify God by doing good. Declare God's praises through words *and* action, through faithful lips *and* lives working in harmony.

And so from 2:13-3:6 Peter addresses three groups which were no doubt prevalent in the church, and who were particularly prone to suffering given their place in Roman society – Christians under a pagan government, slaves under unbelieving masters, and wives with unbelieving husbands – and he shows them what God-glorifying good living looks like. In short, this good living entails submission. Can you see the 'S' word in verses 13, 18 and 3:1?

To submit here is to surrender the right of retaliation, and in the words of verse 17, to show proper respect to those in authority. The response of God's people in the face of suffering is not to strike back, but to show love and grace consistent with the gospel of Jesus and so point people to Christ.

But this is a hard teaching, so tonight's passage furnishes the church with three truths to sustain us in God-glorifying good living. And I say 'us' because even though none of us find ourselves in the circumstances of slavery, we will all find ourselves in situations of unjust suffering, and it is in these moments that God is very concerned about how we respond to the praise of His glory.

So let's look at these three sustaining truths – a prize (18-20), a pattern (21-23) and a power (24-25).

A Prize (2:18-20)

Firstly, a prize. Let me re-read verses 18-20, **Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. ¹⁹ For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. ²⁰ But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.**

Notice the phrase that is repeated in verses 19 and 20, 'it is commendable'. When we bear up under unjust suffering, and being conscious of God, we refuse to retaliate, it is commendable before God.

Just as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 6 that the Father sees and rewards what is done in secret, our Heavenly Father sees the pain and suffering that we endure, and will reward us eternally for when we have been conscious of God in our response to it. Our tears and hardship are precious to God.

Employee, though your hard-work and extra hours have only been met with the boss showing favouritism toward others, God sees your ongoing diligence and refusal to gossip and it is commendable before him.

Friend, though your hours of prayer, persistent love and invitations to church are coldly and perhaps painfully rebuffed, God sees your heartache, treasures it and it is commendable before him.

Parent, though perhaps no one else sees the particular stresses that you have had to endure with your child, whether they be the sleepless nights, the behavioural issues, the medical burden, God

sees your heart to lovingly nurture your child in his teaching and instruction and this is commendable before God.

Patient, though few perhaps understand the physical discomfort arising from your medical condition and uncertainty of your future, God treasures your heart that seeks to cling to his goodness and continue and keep serving his Kingdom.

Your suffering may be as a direct result of your gospel witness or faith, or it may not. But when your response to unearned suffering is one that looks to press on in honouring God, it is precious, and commendable before our Father. Your reward is in heaven. There is a heavenly prize for you.

A Pattern (2:21-23)

It gets better however, let's read on to verses 21-23 to discover a pattern.

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

**“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”**

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

One of the things I love about some of the bush tracks in our area is being able to walk by old indigenous rock engravings. I'm filled with a delightfully shrinking feeling when I know that I've been walking in a place in which others have walked many years before.

The precious thing about these verses is that when we find ourselves in the midst of hardship, we can look down and notice the imprints of Jesus' feet who walked this road before us 2000 years ago. He understands what it is to be overlooked. He understands what it is to be painfully rejected. He understands what it is to be violently mistreated. He understands what it is to be alone and deserted.

Christian if you are in the midst of hardship and suffering now, look down, far from being distant from Jesus, you are perhaps closer than you've ever been. Can you see his footprints?

In such moments, he calls you to continue to follow him in how you respond. As those ant-like soldiers beat Jesus and shoved that crown of thorns on his head, could not the one who formed the rings of Saturn have caused these men to have been incinerated in an instant? But instead, Jesus pressed on in love, refused to retaliate and instead entrusted the situation to him who judges justly. In the face of unfair treatment, we are called to similarly refuse to retaliate as we follow on in the footsteps of Jesus and entrust ourselves and those around us into the hands of the just judge.

Christian, when you feel marginalised by our secular society, do you dream up ways of striking back or of lovingly serving and praying? Employee, when you are publicly ridiculed by your supervisor, do you seek to undermine their leadership with malicious gossip or to honour God with your silence and diligence? Driver, when the victim of tailgating do you seek to return in kind, or safely move out of the way? Congregation member, when you feel neglected and failed by God's flock around you, do you lash out or instead assume the best and seek to provide the love and care that yourself would have hoped for? Look to Jesus and follow in his footsteps of loving submission.

Now all of this of course doesn't mean that corrective action can't or shouldn't be taken. Unlike slaves, we can easily extricate ourselves from toxic workplaces and there will be times when this is appropriate. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to pull someone aside and respectfully call out unacceptable behaviour. In other circumstances, the protection of others may require legal intervention to be taken. But in such instances we need to ask, is my response to this person driven by love and respect, or rather a desire for revenge and retaliation? Is my desire in this response to glorify God and declare his praises, or to do what would be best for me?

A Power (2:24-25)

Finally, the most sustaining truth we have to live God-glorifying-good lives in the face of suffering is found in verses 24-25 –

He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

“You can do whatever you set your mind to” is a Disney adage that has setup Gen Y and millennials with false expectations and much disappointment.

You may well feel this morning that the sort of God-glorifying good-living laid out in this passage might be impossible to attain for you. That this sort of living that shows love and grace in the face of pain and suffering is unrealistic.

Indeed, such a lifestyle would have been completely unachievable had it not been for what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We were previously enslaved to sin such that we had no choice but to cave into it. But Jesus has healed us. He has freed us from sin's guilt and power. As those forgiven, we are now under new management, and sin is one master we need not submit to.

A Christ-like lifestyle of love, forgiveness and submission may feel impossible, but Christ resides inside of you by His Spirit, He is with you as your Good Shepherd and he has given you the power to now say yes to righteousness and no to sin. Jesus doesn't just give us a pattern to follow, but the power to carry it out. When it comes to Godly living, all things are possible through Him who has healed us, freed us and who gives us strength.

You *can* live a Christ-like good life to the glory of God. You can respond with grace, love and respect even in the face of suffering, because you have Jesus with you. And when we live like this, we will powerfully declare God's praises into a world that doesn't know him and the result will be that others come to glorify God on the day he visits us.

Let me finish with this prayer from 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12, **With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.**