

A FISHERMAN'S PASSION

Part 3: Responding to Injustice(1 Peter 2:18-25)

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It has been almost twenty-five years since I moved to Kalamazoo. So, I know my way around the area fairly well now. But the first time that I drove through downtown I got completely lost. With the way that some of the streets merge and then split off, you can easily veer off onto the wrong road without realizing it.

Christians face a similar challenge as we interact with society. From time to time some aspects of culture run parallel to biblical teaching. They might even seem to merge, and it can feel like a great victory for Christianity. But since this is a fallen world, culture inevitably diverges. So, if you are not careful, you can easily veer off to follow one of those cultural ideas without realizing that you are leaving God's truth behind.

First Peter 2 brings us to one of these forks in the road. Our society stresses personal freedom and individual rights, and these values have contributed to the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church. But as Christian beliefs collide with our culture's current ideas about freedom, society presses us to conform. Rather than simply resisting, a lot of Christians want to assert their rights and fight back. That is a very American thing to do, but it may place us on a path that quickly diverges from Christlikeness.

Peter teaches that we must be prepared to suffer for the gospel. That should be our true passion. In verse 12, he says that people will slander Christians as evildoers. As we discussed previously, right around the time that Peter wrote this letter, the Roman Emperor Nero accused Christians of starting a great fire that destroyed much of Rome. This led to a time of intense persecution. Peter may have written his letter before that event, but he was certainly aware of the emperor's immoral character. Nevertheless, he still tells Christians to do good deeds and to submit to the ruling authorities, showing them honor.

In verses 18-25, he turns his focus to slaves. Slavery was common in the ancient world. Some historians suggest that half of the people in the Roman empire may have been enslaved. So, that was the plight of many early Christians. They were probably drawn to the gospel because of how it diverged from their society's norms. In Galatians 3:27-28, Paul wrote,

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

But those early Christians did not seek to overthrow the institution of slavery. They were nonchalant about it. In 1 Corinthians 7:21-22, Paul says,

Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ.

In some of Paul's other letters, he instructs slaves to focus on being submissive and serving well. Today we can apply that teaching in our approach to work. Peter, however, focuses on how slaves should respond to unjust treatment, so his lessons extend far beyond the workplace. They apply to any setting. In 1 Peter 2:18-25, he identifies three goals for Christians to pursue as we experience injustice.

Now slaves had very little legal recourse, if any, for unjust treatment. As I mentioned earlier, we can be thankful that we do have rights and protections in our society, and it is not wrong to take advantage of those. But these goals in 1 Peter 2 must take priority. They should shape our demeanor and guide our response.

Please God

If you set sail across the open sea under thick cloud cover, you can lose all sense of direction. If you are tossed and turned by a storm, you could become even more confused. It would be foolish to just follow your gut and go in a direction that feels right. You need a compass to orient yourself to true north.

People today often speak of following your moral compass. They rely on conscience to be their guide, but even as Christians our consciences can become misinformed as we are tossed and turned by our culture. So, we must orient ourselves to God and his word. Our goal should be to please him.

Peter identifies this goal as he addresses Christian slaves in 1 Peter 2:18. He says, "Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust."

Back in verse 13 Peter spoke of being subject to every human institution. Here in verse 18, he focuses on household slaves and their relationship with their masters, telling them to be subject with all respect. But the word for respect could also be translated as fear, and in verse 17 he just told his readers to fear God. So, he probably has in mind the same idea here. It is the fear of God that should lead servants to submit even when their masters are unjust, or a more literal translation of that word is "crooked".

In Colossians 3:22-24, Paul also encourages servants to fear the Lord. In fact, he calls all Christians to do their work to please God. He says,

Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Even though we are not slaves, we should still seek to serve the Lord and to please him in how we work. He sees all that we do. He knows our hearts. So, we should approach work with a right heart and do the very best that we can even when our employer is not looking.

But, as I mentioned, Peter takes the thought of pleasing God in a different direction in 1 Peter 2:19-20. He focuses on responding to being treated unjustly. He says,

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 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.

Literally, Peter begins and ends this passage by saying, “This is grace.” He could mean that we only endure unjust treatment through the work of God’s grace in their lives. While that is certainly true, the word grace is also used to speak of finding favor or approval. So, some translations say, “This is commendable.” If that is the right interpretation, then Peter is using the same idea as Paul in Colossians 3. God commends us and rewards us not only for the good that we do, but also for the suffering that we endure.

There is, however, no credit in suffering if you are being punished for a sin. God commands slaves to be subject to their masters. So, if they disobey or act disrespectfully to their master, they are sinning against God. The master’s response may be overly harsh, but it is not persecution. The Lord will ultimately hold the master accountable for his unjust response, but he will not commend a Christian slave for suffering that he brought upon himself.

This clarification is important because some Christians perceive any restrictions as persecution, particularly in the workplace. For instance, an employer might prohibit the discussion of religion on company time. It is still possible to obey the Lord by having the conversation outside of work. So, if a Christian employee refuses to follow the company rules because it’s not convenient, such behavior does not please the Lord. The employer may be unjust in punishing the Christian while ignoring the similar behavior in others, but that is not the point.

Peter speaks in verse 19 of enduring by being mindful of the Lord. Other translations say “because of conscience toward God” or “because they are conscious of God.” His point is that we must align our conscience with God’s word. In this case, the Christian must work to please God by submitting to authority even when the demands placed upon us seem unreasonable or unjust. As we considered in discussing submission to government, the only exception is when we are ordered to do something that God forbids or when we are forbidden from doing something that God commands. Peter himself articulated this thought in Acts 4:19-20 when the Jewish council commanded him to stop speaking and teaching in Jesus’ name.

So, we must slow down and question our impulses. Are we seeking to please God, or are we just being defiant and argumentative? When someone claims to be persecuted for their faith, make sure you understand the situation before you take their side. They may need encouragement and support, but in some cases, the person may need to be rebuked and reminded of the importance that God places on submission. It should always be our goal to please him.

Follow Christ

When you find steps laid out along a trail, they typically make your journey easier. They simplify the climb to some beautiful spot that you want to reach. But following in the steps of Jesus is something different. He has laid out a difficult path for us that tests our faith, particularly when we face injustice. Nevertheless, it should always be our goal to follow him.

Peter understood the difficulty of doing that more than anyone. He was there when they came to arrest Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. His initial response was to fight back. He lashed out with a sword and cut off a man's ear. If they did not already know the story, I suspect that many believers today would justify his actions as self-defense, but Jesus rebuked Peter for his violent response and his lack of faith (Matt 26:50-54).

As they led Jesus away to the home of the high priest, Peter followed at a distance. When people began to recognize him, he responded in the opposite way. He fearfully denied that he knew Jesus. John 21 tells us how after his resurrection Jesus restored Peter. The book of Acts relates that Peter grew to become a humble and confident Christlike leader who endured persecution. Tradition tells us that he was ultimately crucified. So, his personal experience adds great weight to his words in 1 Peter 2:21. He speaks of suffering and says, "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 often focus on the salvation that Jesus accomplished through his suffering, and Peter will address that thought in verse 24. But here he presents the cross as an example to follow, a pattern to trace. He refers to Christ's suffering as a calling given to every Christian. That idea should not surprise us. Jesus made it clear in his teaching. Luke 9:23 tells us, "And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.'"

Jesus was not simply using a metaphor. He was preparing his followers to face death. Some believers fail to grasp that reality. Others go to the opposite extreme, treating martyrdom as a glorious and heroic act of defiance. Perhaps Peter anticipated this confusion, because he elaborates on how Jesus suffered. In 1 Peter 2:22-23, he says,

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 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.

In contrast to the slave in verse 20 who was beaten for his sin, Jesus was perfectly innocent. He did not deserve the treatment that he received, and it is good for us to remember how unjust it was. He was betrayed by his disciple, Judas, for thirty pieces of silver and was abandoned by the other disciples. He was arrested and tried by the Jewish council under cover of darkness in violation of their own rules. They falsely convicted him of blasphemy, and then took turns spitting upon him, striking him, and mocking him.

In the morning the Jews brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, accusing him of rebellion against Rome. Pilate knew that these charges were false. He even gave the crowd an opportunity to request Jesus' release, but they asked for a robber named Barabbas to be released instead. The Romans scourged Jesus, dressed him up in a purple robe and a crown of thorns, mocked him, and beat him. Perhaps Pilate thought that this might satisfy the Jews, but they kept calling for Jesus to be crucified, so Pilate gave in.

Jesus was paraded through the streets of Jerusalem and taken out to Calvary. He was stripped of his garments, and spikes were hammered through his hands and feet. He was then hoisted up for all to see. As his muscles cramped and he struggled to breathe, people continued to mock him until he died.

There has never been a greater injustice than the events of that day. How did Jesus react to it all? Peter highlights three responses. First, he says that no deceit was found in his mouth. This expression comes from Isaiah 53:9, in the prophecy of the Suffering Servant. Jesus could have made excuses. He could have said what Pilate and the Jews wanted to hear. We would certainly be tempted to respond that way. But he humbly spoke the truth without compromise.

Next, Peter says that when he was reviled, he did not revile in return. Some translations say he did not insult people, but the word revile seems to capture the attitude of the heart. He did not vent anger and scorn. He did not curse at people and call them names. It does not take much provocation for us to react that way to people. Our culture even treats reviling people as a show of strength. It's not. It's the exact opposite. Jesus exhibited true spiritual strength in his silence.

Third, Peter says that when Jesus suffered, he did not threaten. As the Son of God, he had the authority and power to proclaim judgment upon those who were abusing him, but we see the exact opposite. Luke 23:34 tells us that as the soldiers crucified him, he said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

The key to Jesus' response to his unjust suffering is there at the end of 1 Peter 2:23. He believed in his Heavenly Father's ultimate justice, and fully entrusted his life to him. Are you willing to do the same? It is a hard path, but we are called to follow in his steps.

Live Out Salvation

What would you think if you came across a car being towed by a horse? You would probably assume that something went wrong with the car. It must have broken down or run out of gas. Perhaps it never worked right, and the owner should just get rid of it. It might seem ridiculous, but the other possibility is that the owner never bothered to learn what the vehicle can do or how it works.

Some people have a similar problem with the gospel. They bought into Christianity, so to speak. But something is wrong, because they rely on everything else but the gospel to pull them through life. Their lives are no different from the world. Others look at them and say, "See! Christianity never works! Just get rid of it." But the truth of the matter is that these people are not living out salvation. They may not grasp its power or how it works.

Living out our salvation should always be our goal. Peter shows us two ways to draw strength from the gospel. First, we find strength in the new life that we receive. In 1 Peter 2:24, Peter says, "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."

The injustice that Jesus suffered was the punishment that we deserve for our sins. Peter draws the phrase about bearing our sins from the prophecy in Isaiah 53:4, but it reaches farther back in Old Testament history to the scapegoat of the day of Atonement. Leviticus 16:21-22 instructed the high priest to confess Israel's sins over a goat each year and to send it out into the wilderness to symbolically bear all their iniquities away. Jesus fulfilled that picture once and for all.

The cost of bearing our sins was more than physical suffering. When Peter refers to the cross as a tree, he is alluding to Deuteronomy 21:23, where it says that a man put to death by hanging on a tree was cursed by God. That is what we deserve, and that is what Jesus experienced. He spoke of it from the cross as he cried out the words of Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The innocent Son of God endured all the punishment that we deserve for our heinous sins against our perfectly holy God, so that we can receive complete forgiveness through faith in him.

But we cannot receive that forgiveness and carry on unchanged. When we believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, he changes our spiritual condition. Peter tells us that Christ's saving work enables us to start putting sin to death and living righteously. We can resist temptation and grow in obedience. Here again, Peter draws from Isaiah 53:5 in saying that we have been healed. This does not mean that

Christians never get physically sick. It is clear from the context that this healing is spiritual. We can overcome the sickness of sin, because we have the life of Christ at work in us.

So, we find strength, first, in this new spiritual life and, second, in our relationship with Jesus. In 1 Peter 2:25, Peter says, “For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

John 10:11 tells us that Jesus claimed to be the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. He came to seek and save the lost. So, once you have returned to him you can find strength in knowing that he leads us, watches over us, and protects us. Psalm 23:4 reflects the confidence of having a shepherd. There David says, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

So, our new life and the oversight of Jesus are the resources that give us the strength to follow in his steps as we face opposition. We do not have to fear the hard path. We can live to please God. We can be truthful rather than deceitful. We can be silent instead of reviling people. We can speak the truth of the gospel and pray for God to save our opponents. We can live out our salvation.

Such behavior displays the reality of salvation for all the world to see. Paul says that even slaves can have a powerful testimony in this way. In Titus 2:9-10, he writes,

Bondservants are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.

We receive an amazing salvation through faith in Christ. It should be our goal to live it out.

In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul said, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” It may be relatively mild or very intense, but how will you respond? First, make it your goal to obey and please God by respecting and submitting to authorities as much as you can, even if they are harsh and unreasonable. Second, aim to follow Christ’s example by not being deceitful, not reviling people, and not threatening them. Entrust yourself fully to God. Third, draw upon your new life in Christ and your relationship with him as our Shepherd to live out your salvation and display its power.

Do you have that power in your life? We have all strayed from the Lord like lost sheep. Our sinful deeds deeply offend our holy God. But Jesus laid down his life to save us by bearing our sins on the cross. So, if you have never done so, I invite you to return to your Shepherd today. Believe in his good news of salvation. If you want to learn more about him, the tenth chapter of John’s Gospel would be a good place to read.

If you are a believer, are you pursuing these three goals? We struggle to do so when things are good, and it gets even harder when we face opposition. So, take this opportunity to incorporate these goals into your life. It might help to select one of them as a special focus this week. Read back through this passage and meditate on it. Think through how it applies to different situations in your life. Pray for wisdom and strength to follow through. As you do, think of other believers who might be facing similar difficulties. Pray for them and seek to encourage them.

May we find grace to help in our time of need!

Reflect

What unjust treatment have you experienced? Was it somehow related to your faith? How did you respond?

On which of these goals do you most need to focus? What could you do to cultivate this?

What could you do to encourage other believers who are experiencing injustice?