

February 10, 2008 by Steve Brandon



Suffering Servants

1 Peter 2:18-20

1. Submit to Your Earthly Masters (verse 18).
2. Find Favor from Your Heavenly Master (verses 19-20).

Before we actually get to the text before us, I want to spend a few moments reviewing the book of 1 Peter. We haven't done this very often, but it is good for us to review every now and then to make sure that we catch the flow of this letter.

Peter was writing to a group of scattered believers all across Asia Minor. According to chapter 1, verse 1, we see that they lived in the regions of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Peter calls them "aliens," (1:1), not because they are from another planet, nor because they have moved into these regions from another area, but, rather, because they have believed in Jesus Christ. In verse 3, we see that God "has caused [them] to be born again." They are different than the majority of people in the world. Not only have they been born of flesh and blood. But, now they have been born of the Spirit. Because of that, they are no longer "of this world." They are aliens and strangers (2:11).

This is true of every believer in Jesus Christ. We are "in this world," but, we are not "of this world." Because we have been born again, our hope is not placed in this world. Rather, we have set our hope in the world to come, because we believe in the work of Christ on our behalf. In chapter 1, verse 4, Peter describes the hope that we have. Peter describes it as our "inheritance." It is "imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away" (1:4). It is "reserved in heaven for you" who believe (1:4).

Peter is very careful to begin his epistle with a description of the glories of heaven, because his readers were facing hell on earth. Their suffering is described in verse 6, "In this [that is, the glories of heaven], you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials." The people of Peter's day were suffering through some trials in their lives. Their trials were not all the same. That's the point of Peter saying, "various trials."

In the flow of the letter, Peter doesn't really get to describing the various trials that they were facing until chapter 2, verse 11. Rather, Peter focuses his attention first upon the great salvation that has been provided for them, and how it is that they ought to live as a result. In other words, Peter first gave the good news and then the bad news.

The good news is that their salvation was marvelous and beyond description. In chapter 1, verse 7, Peter says that the result of your faith will be "praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." In verse 9, Peter talks about the outcome of our faith is the salvation of our souls. In verses 10-12, Peter describes how the prophets studied long and hard to understand what it is that we now experience. In verse 13, Peter tells his readers to "fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

All of these things ought to focus our attention upon things above, not on earthly things. And as you do that, Peter calls his readers to living that is appropriate to such a hope. "Be holy yourselves in all your behavior" (verse 15). "Conduct yourselves in [the fear of God] during the time of your stay on earth" (verse 17). "Fervently love one another from the heart" (verse 22). "Put aside [all types of sin]" (2:1). "Long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (2:2). "Come to Jesus" (2:4) realizing that you will never be disappointed (2:6). "Open your mouths and "proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (2:9).

That's the first part of Peter's epistle. The glories of heaven that await us are unbelievable. So live a life that is worthy of your calling. That is, in holiness and love and adoration of Christ. And then, beginning in chapter 2, verse 11, Peter takes a turn in his little letter. He will begin to describe some practical ways in which the people were suffering.

They were suffering from the temptations of the flesh (2:11). They were being slandered by the Gentiles as evil doers (2:12). The political environment made it difficult for Christians (2:13-14). Some of the servants among them were experiencing hardship from the hands of their masters (2:18-20). Some of the women had unbelieving, disobedient husbands, which caused their marriage to suffer hardship (3:1-6). People were doing evil against them (3:9). People were insulting them (3:9). They were suffering for the sake of righteousness (3:13). This verse again mentions that they were being slandered. (3:16). This verse speaks of how they were suffering for doing right (3:17). They were being maligned for turning from their old, sinful practices (4:4). Peter describes their suffering as a "fiery ordeal" (4:12). Peter describes their trials as "sharing in the sufferings of Christ" (4:13). They were being reviled (4:14). They were suffering for being a "Christian" (4:16).

Mixed and mingled in and among these words describing some of the hardships that they were facing was counsel as to how to deal with these difficulties. Time after time after time, Peter counseled them to live righteously.

For instance, "Abstain from fleshly lusts" (2:11). "Keep your behaviour excellent" (2:12). Let them see your good deeds and glorify God (2:12). "Do not use your freedom as a covering for evil" (2:16). Do what is right (2:20). Wives, keep your behavior chaste and respectful. "Be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, not returning evil for evil, but giving a blessing instead" (3:8-9). Be zealous for doing good (3:13). Be righteous (3:14). "Sanctify Christ in your hearts" (3:15). "Keep a good conscience" and have good behavior even when slandered

(3:16). Suffer for doing what is right (3:17). Don't live for the lusts of men (4:2). There are also many exhortations to righteousness in 4:3-11. A good summary of all of these commands come in 1 Peter 4:19,

A good summary of Peter's advice comes in chapter 4, verse 19, "Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." Suffering has come upon you by the sovereign hand of God. In turn, you shall entrust your souls to God, by living obediently to Him, trusting that He is doing what is right in bringing these trials.

The final promise that caps off this letter comes in chapter 5, verse 10, "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you." Indeed, you are suffering now, but God will eventually bring you into His eternal glory. As we have said often in the past few months that we have been in this epistle: "Suffer Now, Glory Later." They were suffering now. But, later, they would enjoy glory with God.

It is in that context that we arrive at chapter 2, verses 18-20. In these verses, Peter is describing the particular difficulties that servants of his day were facing. They were suffering at the hands of their masters. My message is entitled, "Suffering Servants." Consider our text.

1 Peter 2:18-20

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this [finds] favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer [for it] you patiently endure it, this [finds] favor with God.

I begin with my first point:

1. Submit to Your Earthly Masters (verse 18).

I take this point almost directly out of the language of verse 18, which says, "Servants, be submissive to your masters."

In the first century, A. D., when these things were written, slavery was very much a reality in the Roman Empire (to which Peter is writing). It has been estimated that more nearly half of the population were slaves at that time. No doubt, there were many who received this letter who found themselves to be servants in this life. That is, they had masters who told them what to do. Peter knew this. And he simply called them to submit themselves willingly to those who were masters over them.

Now, when we hear about slavery, our natural tendency is to think of the slavery that took place in the early history of America, with African Americans who had been hunted down by slave traders in Africa and brought to America on boats against their will. Then, they were forced into long hard labor by their owners, with little sympathy and compassion for them. However, by and large, this was not the situation for many slaves in the Roman empire. With nearly half of the population being slaves, many slaves held very respectful positions, such as doctors and nurses and teachers. Many slaves were in positions of management, who would oversee the work of others. Some slaves were able to purchase their freedom after so many years of service. Other slaves willingly became slaves to get out of debt. Some decided to remain a slave, as their master treated them fairly.

But, don't let those sorts of things deceive you into thinking that slavery in those times was wonderful. Because they weren't. First of all, I don't care how good your "slavery" was, you were still a slave. You had no ultimate freedom. You were at the mercy of your master. Furthermore, some slaves had been abused. Some slaves had been conquered in war and had been subjected to slavery when they were captured. Other slaves had been kidnapped and forced into service. There were many masters who were cruel to their slaves. I'm sure that their cruelty rivaled that of slave owners in the south who beat their slaves into submission. In this context, Peter is writing specifically to those slaves who are being treated poorly.

And yet, in all of this, Peter still calls those slaves who are hearing or reading his letter to "be submissive to [their] masters" (verse 18). He gives no room for any way out of this command. It doesn't matter whether these servants were nicely treated or harshly treated by their masters. All of them were to be submissive. That's the point of how verse 18 ends, "Not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable."

You have to feel the weight of this. Peter is exhorting those across the Roman Empire who were called as slaves not to revolt against their slavery, but rather, to submit to their masters, even if they are being treated unfairly. And their submission wasn't merely to be an external compliance. Rather, there was to be an submissive attitude that was motivated by a fear of the Lord as well.

Peter says that these servants should "be submissive ... with all respect." Literally, the words used here are "be submissive ... with all fear." In other words, their submission was to be in such a way that they gave a healthy respect to their master. No resisting. No talking back. No complaining. Rather, it was to be respectful submission, respecting the authority of their masters, as well as fearing the authority of God. I remind you that in chapter 2, verse 17, Peter told his readers to "fear God." And, in fearing God, you fear the authorities that he has established in your life. Slaves were to submit with fear because God's authority is displayed in the authority of the earthly masters that they were under.

For those who had good and kind and gentle masters, this wouldn't have been much of a problem. It's easy to submit to the one who cares about your welfare, compliments you when you have done a good job, and sympathizes with your weaknesses. For, it is even possible for a good master to turn a rebellious slave into a submissive one.

In recent days, I have been reading "Bedtime Stories" to my children. They love listening to daddy read them these stories. And, it's a bit of an incentive to get my children in bed quickly. "If you aren't in bed quickly, there won't be a story." Anyway, we recently read the story entitled, "Old Joe's Surprise." (And so, imagine yourself snuggled in bed and listening to your father read the following story about a good

master's ability to turn a rebellious slave into a submissive one.

In those bad old days when slavery was still practiced, Old Joe stood in the market place awaiting the auction.

He was a grand specimen of manhood, big, strong, and healthy, but on his face at this moment there was an expression of anger and stubbornness that only faintly reflected the rebellious feelings in his heart.

His master had died, and in consequence he and many others of his fellow slaves were to be sold at public auction to the highest bidder. How he hated it all! He hated his changes; He hated the system which made it possible for human beings to be bought and sold like cattle; He hated the dreadful humiliation.

While he stood there waiting in the hot sun, there grew up in his heart a determination that he would not be bought, and if he were, he would never work for his new master.

Presently his name was called. The auctioneer began to describe him. "Joe. Fine strong fellow. Lots of hard work in him yet--"

"I will not work!" cried Joe in desperation.

The auctioneer ignored him, and went on giving his age, his height, his weight, and other particulars. "What offers?" he concluded.

Some one made a bid.

"I will not work!" cried Joe at the top of his voice.

No one bothered. The bidding went on.

Joe listened with interest that merged into amazement. He had no idea he was worth so much. Up and up went the price. Gradually the number of bidders decreased, but two or three went on. One man seemed determined to purchase him whatever the cost.

At last, when the price had reached the highest figure Joe had ever heard offered for a slave, the hammer fell.

He was sold!

Soon his new master came over to take him.

"I will not work," said Joe. "You can thrash me, but I will not work."

The new master said nothing, but proceeded to lead him away to his wagon. All the way out to the plantation Joe kept on muttering to himself, "I won't work. I won't work."

At last they arrived, and the master, instead of taking Joe to the usual dirty slave quarters, led him to a neat little cottage, remarking, "Joe, this will be your home while you are with us."

"This for me?" said Joe, surprised. "Thank you, but I will not work."

"You do not need to work," said his master. "Just live here as long as you please."

"But, master," cried Joe in utter amazement, "aren't you going to try to make me work?"

"Oh, no," said the master quietly. "I bought you to set you free."

"To set me free! Oh, master," cried Joe, falling on his knees before him, "how can I thank you enough? I will gladly serve you always and do anything you want me to do."

From that moment Joe became the most faithful and loyal servant his master ever had.

And children, what that good master did for Joe, Jesus has done for us. He saw us standing in the market place, as it were, chained with sin, and our hearts full of rebellion, and He gave everything He had to set us free. The Bible says that we were redeemed not "with corruptible things, as silver and gold; ... but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

When such a price has been paid for us, what should be our attitude? What should we say to Him who paid it? What else can we say than, "Jesus, dear Master, we will love and serve you all our days"? [\[1\]](#)

Even a good master can change a rebellious slave. Now, it doesn't always happen like this. But, it is a good illustration of the ease with which servants will find submitting to a good and gentle master. So we have found Jesus to be.

And the opposite may be true as well. It may be that a submissive slave may change the ways of his cruel master. As the slave does everything that the master commands, it may well be the case that the master begins to have compassion upon the slave and treat him with respect. A Biblical example of this taking place would be Joseph. He was thrown in prison as a special prisoner to the king. And yet, through his good and submissive behavior, he was soon elevated to be in charge of all the prisoners (Gen. 39:20).

Good behavior is no guarantee that your master will change and begin treating you with respect. And my guess is that it's a bit unlikely. But, Peter doesn't rely upon any future change in the master's treatment of you. It doesn't matter if your master is a good and gentle master or whether your master is a cruel and perverted master. Servants are called to be submissive to their masters, with an attitude of respect. Period. End of statement. No exceptions. No questions.

Fundamentally, we are called to submit in this way because we are free. Back in 2:16, Peter calls us to "Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God." As believers in Christ, we are free from the tyranny of other men. We serve the Sovereign Lord. Our sins have been forgiven. God has given us a new nature. Our freedom in Christ, compels us to do what is right, rather than using it to cover evil behavior. And as we relate to our masters, what is right is being "submissive to [our] masters." When Old Joe, the slave, realized that he was free, he was willing to serve. That's our condition. We are free from men. We ought to be willing to serve.

Peter's counsel here is exactly like Paul's counsel. In Ephesians and Colossians and 1 Timothy and Titus, Paul gives counsel to slaves. In every single one of these epistles, Paul addressed slaves directly for specific application. As he does, his counsel sounds exactly like that of Peter: complete submission with an attitude of respect.

Ponder what Paul said in the following passages of Scripture.

Ephesians 6:5-8

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

Colossians 3:22-25

Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

1 Timothy 6:1-2

Let all who are under the yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine may not be spoken against. And let those who have believers as their masters not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but let them serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved.

Titus 2:9-10

Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.

You might easily ask yourself, "Why does the Bible reason this way? If the abuses of slavery are so bad, why doesn't the Bible simply condemn slavery as we have rightly done in America?"

Much of it has to do with the way that God changes the world. By in large, the Lord hasn't seen fit to change the world through mighty powers of revolution. Rather, the Lord will change this world as Christians are faithful to demonstrate that this world is not their home. The world looks on and is amazed at how we are living (and dying) for the world to come, entrusting ourselves to the Lord, even when we have every human instinct within us crying out to resist and rebel and stand up for our own rights! But, that's not the way that God has chosen to change the world.

When Christ came into the world, He submitted Himself to the authorities of His day, and suffered for it. And the world was forever changed! And verse 21 says that we have been called to imitate the life of Jesus, "You have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps." And so, we are called to submit ourselves to our authorities, even if they are unreasonable and unfair.

Indeed, Christianity is revolutionary. But, it's not revolutionary by protests and displays of power. Rather, it's revolutionary as the world sees that we have a better hope. And there is no better way to show that hope than by walking in righteousness, even when life is difficult. Through the course of time, the Lord will establish His kingdom in this way.

How is it that the pagan Roman Empire accepted Christianity in masse in the fourth century A. D.? It wasn't through early Christians revolting against the Roman rulers and insisting upon their ways. Rather, it was through their righteous behavior, even when badly treated. Eventually, the Romans came to see that Christians had a better hope than they ever had. Eventually, in 325 A. D., Constantine declared the entire Roman Empire to be a Christian Empire. That's how God changes the world.

At this point, it is good for us to ask the question of application. "To whom do these words apply?" The simplest and most straightforward application is the application to employees. Wayne Grudem writes,

Even though there is no exact parallel to such 'servant' status in modern society, the fact that [slavery] was by far the most common kind of employee-employer relationship in the ancient world, and that it encompassed a broad range of degrees of functional and economic freedom, means that the application of Peter's directives to 'employees' today is a very appropriate one.

And I fully agree. We can easily take these words and apply them directly, "Employees, be submissive to your bosses with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable" (2:18). For those of you who are in the workforce, Peter is calling you to be submissive to your boss.

So, how are you doing? Those of you who are working in the workforce with a boss, are you being "submissive to your masters with all respect"? Perhaps it might be good for you to ask your boss.

What a radical thing it might be for you to go to work on Monday and have a chat with your boss, which goes something like this:

Mr. Boss, you know that I'm a church-going man. This past Sunday, our pastor preached a message about the workplace. He demonstrated from scripture that employees are to submit to their masters with all respect. That means that I'm supposed to be doing that with you. I'm eager to be obedient to the scripture. Could you please tell me, Mr. Boss, how I'm doing? Am I being submissive to you? Am I treating you with respect? Are there any areas in my work in which I might show improvement?

How's that for application? Who better to evaluate this verse than your employer?

Before we go on to verses 19-20, I want to point out another application here. The word used here for "servants" isn't your typical word to describe a "slave." The normal word for slave is *doulos* (doulos), which is used well over 100 times. But, the word that Peter chose to use is the word, *oiketai* (oiketai), which occurs only four times in the New Testament (Luke 16:13; Rom. 14:4; Act. 10:7). This word is derived from the word, *oikos* (oikos), which means "house." Which means that this word has more of a focus upon the "house-slave" in particular, although, it may easily be used with the general designation of a slave in general (Luke 16:13; Rom. 14:4).

Now, are there any "house-slaves" in our congregation? You children might easily relate here: house-slaves? Now, on the one hand, this isn't a very good designation for you, because you aren't slaves, you are children. Your relationship with your parents ought to be one of love, rather than one of duty. But, on the other hand, this isn't so bad for all of you to think of yourselves as servants in the home. "We do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5).

You ought to serve your parents around the house. Pick up your room. Help with laundry. Help with the dishes. Vacuum the living room. Mop the floors. Dust the furniture. Help with the food preparation. Shovel the snow. Mow the lawn. Do what your parents tell you to do with all respect. All of these types of things, I'm sure that you children can easily do, and thereby (1) Submit to Your Earthly Masters (verse 18). Let's turn our attention now to my second point.

2. Find Favor from Your Heavenly Master (verses 19-20).

It may just be the case that some of you have parents, who you think are unreasonable. This may especially be the case as some of you children are getting older and you think that your parents are old fashioned and don't understand what is going on in your life. As you are getting older and having more opportunities to do things, your parents are protecting you by placing some limits upon you, which you may not like at the current time. If this is you, verses 19 and 20 tell you how to find favor from God in the midst of your circumstances.

It may also be the case that some of you have bosses, who you think are unreasonable. Perhaps he is placing too much pressure upon you to work late. Perhaps he is demanding of you a higher standard than you are capable of reaching. If this is you, verses 19 and 20 tell you how to find favor from God in the midst of your circumstances.

Consider what Peter says in these verses.

1 Peter 2:19-20

For this [finds] favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer [for it] you patiently endure it, this [finds] favor with God.

With these words, Peter's point is to explain what finds favor with God. Verse 19 begins with this phrase, "For this finds favor." Verse 20 ends with this phrase, "this finds favor with God." Your translation may say it a bit differently. It may say, "This is commendable." (NKJV, NIV). Or, it may say, "This is a gracious thing" (ESV). The idea is the same. These verses are conveying the idea that you can find favor in God's sight in the midst of your sufferings. You do this by doing what is right, even if you will pay the consequences.

I don't know your circumstances at work or at home. But, here is an example of what Peter is talking about. He's talking about your boss telling you to do something that is against company policy or against your conscience or flat out illegal. Rather than engaging in that activity, you refuse, because of your conscience before God. Or, perhaps you report the activity to your boss's boss. He gets in trouble, but you bear the brunt of being a whistle-blower. And if you endure under such unjust suffering, God is well-pleased with you. If this is you, you can comfort in God, knowing that you have found favor in His sight.

For instance, I have a friend who used to work in corporate America for one of the large accounting firms. At one point, he was out wining and dining some customers in another state. His boss had arranged an evening at a comedy club. When some of the jokes were told, my friend realized that this was not a place for him to be. His conscience before God would not allow him to listen to such filth. And so, he left and went to his hotel room early that night, rather than spending the evening with the customers. That next day, his boss was infuriated with him and told him, "Don't you ever do that again." My friend explained the situation that he couldn't be in the same room where God was blasphemed and people were laughing. But still, his boss was very angry with him.

Now, he may not have gained favor with his boss that day. But, he sure did gain favor with God on that day. Because, he was suffering unjustly. He was doing what is right and was on the blunt end of the wrath of his boss.

That's what Peter is talking about. Your master gives you an order, but you cannot in good conscience do what was asked. And so you disobey and receive the consequences, thereby suffering unjustly for doing what is right.

Now, in Peter's day, the punishment for such disobedience may well have been a scourging upon his back. In our day and age, the suffering may be different. You may face probation at work. Or, you may simply be fired. If this happens to you, I would encourage you to entrust yourself to God, who judges rightly.

The good news for us is that we always have the opportunity to seek a new job. Unlike those in Peter's day. However, over the years, I have found a very curious thing. Those who complain of an unruly boss often find that they have a similar boss at their next job. And again at their next job.

Peter clarifies the situation in verse 20. He says that you don't find favor in God's sight for simply enduring your punishment with a patient resolve.

For instance, suppose you are in a work environment, and your boss gives you clear orders to do something. But, you fail to do it. And then, later, your boss comes along and discovers that you didn't do what he told you to do. And maybe your boss suspends you without pay or even fires you. The favor of God isn't upon you simply because you didn't challenge the reason why your boss fired you. You deserve to be fired. You didn't submit yourself to your boss.

But, here is what finds favor with God. Your boss gives you to report the profits of your business to the IRS. He wants for you to ignore the cash receipts, but you report them anyway. Your boss finds out, and you lose your job. You did what was right, but you suffered for it. Your suffering is great, because now, you are out of work for six months. When you gladly accept the circumstances as coming from your faithful Creator. (4:19). And when you entrust your soul to him in patient endurance, you will find great favor in the sight of God.

Here's what finds favor with God. Rather than climbing the corporate ladder, which requires that you make compromises all the way up, you stand firm for righteousness and find yourself on the way out, rather than on the way up.

This is what finds favor with God. A slanderous email is sent throughout your entire company about you. Rather than retaliating, you carry on your business in righteousness.

God loves to see people patiently enduring unjust suffering. Why? Because it puts the power of the gospel on display for all to see. When people see you behaving in this way, others will ask you about it (1 Peter 3:15). You will have a chance to proclaim Christ to them.

May God give you strength to (1) submit to your earthly masters, so that you might (2) find favor from your heavenly master.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 10, 2008 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories, Vol. 2, pp. 80-82.

[2] Wayne Grudem, 1 Peter (The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), p. 124.