

FIRST PETER

Lesson 12

Duties of Slaves to Masters

1 Peter 2:18-25

Do you feel your boss deals unjustly, harshly and critically with you? Perhaps you are in the military and feel your commanding officer is mean, unreasonable and inflexible. Maybe you have a coach or a teacher you feel harasses you unmercifully and never gives you a square deal. If so, Peter has something to say to you in this passage. In this context he is speaking about the attitude slaves are to have towards their masters, but in principle it can be applied to employer-employee or management-labor relationships.

First Peter 2:18-25 is related to a broader thought which begins in 2:11 and continues through 3:12, Peter calls these Christians “aliens and strangers”; they were on a pilgrimage moving on to their heavenly home. Yet they still had responsibilities on this earth to their government (2:13-17), as slaves to their masters (2:18-25) or to each other in marriage (3:1-7). Someone has said that Peter was giving “ethics for exiles.” The one theme he repeats over and over is submission to authority, whether it be to the state, the employer or within the marriage bond. The paramount duty of every Christian is submission. It is a bitter pill for it strikes right at the root of pride and independence in our hearts. We do not want to bow to anyone. We do not want to submit to any authority, for our sin nature wants to be as free as the wind, accounting to no one.

Peter says in 2:11, “*I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.*” These fleshly lusts are strong passions of any kind. It is quite likely that in this context he is referring to the tendency we have to assert ourselves, to demand our own way, to make sure we receive what is legally and rightfully ours. When we feel we have been unjustly treated, it is the spirit of rebellion and independence in us that causes us to rant and rave, pout, jump up and down and insist that people treat us right. This negative spirit can make deep inroads into our personalities, causing us to disintegrate spiritually, bringing about bitterness, resentment and ugly attitudes.

As Christians, we are to abstain from giving place to these passions in our lives. This must have been the problem these Asian Christians were experiencing, for it seems they wanted to bolt out from a tyrannical government, a harsh slave-master or any unbelieving or unsympathetic husband.

SUBMISSION OF SLAVES TO MASTERS (2:18)**“Servants . . .”**

This should be translated “slaves” and more particularly “household slaves.” While in the first century the gospel spread throughout every class, the vast majority of Christians were slaves. In the Roman Empire, it is said that half the population were slaves to the other half. Some have estimated there were sixty million slaves at the time Peter wrote this epistle. They had come from all parts of the known world as a result of the Roman military conquests. Many of them had formerly been government workers, doctors, lawyers,

teachers, military men, or in other professions but were now forced to be servants of Roman citizens.

The word “slave” here is literally “domestic” or “household slave,” one of the most degrading and gauling kinds of servitude. This type of slave had to be at the beck and call of his master at all times. Household slaves had to clean house, care for the master, appease the woman of the house, cook the meals, carry out the whims of the master and do many other distasteful and degrading duties.

The lot of the slave in the Roman Empire was very difficult. They were often treated as animals and all were branded. They had no legal rights. Most of them were not allowed to marry so they only co-habitated. If children came, they always belonged to the masters. Masters had the right of life or death over them. Slaves were cruelly and harshly treated, so they were a bitter and militant group in the Roman Empire. They were a hardened and restless class of people, yet the gospel came to them, and those who trusted Christ and chose to follow Him faced many searching questions such as: “How should we Christian slaves respond to our masters? Should we throw off the yoke of slavery?”

“be submissive to your masters with all respect”

Peter was writing to Christian slaves. They had been touched by God’s sovereign grace, redeemed by the blood of Christ, and called and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Since conversion to Christ, they were now His bondslaves, internally set free from the bondage of sin and Satan, but they were still slaves externally to Roman masters.

The command to slaves was, “Be submissive.” Submission means “to take a position or place under”; that is, obey masters to the extent you possibly can. They were to submit to human masters, even when they felt the masters were wrong, unless their orders conflicted with some specific command or principle of Scripture. They were never to lie, steal, cheat, murder or do anything which would transgress the moral law of God in order to please their masters. Yet, in all matters which do not involve the moral law of God, they were to submit “with all respect.” This literally means, “with all fear.” It may refer to fear or respect to the slave masters, or it may be a reference to the fear of God. They were to submit out of fear of God, not of men. They were to serve their God first and their human masters second.

Remember, submission is not agreeing with someone or a group; it is voluntarily and willingly placing ourselves under another or others when we feel we have been wronged or dealt with unjustly.

“Not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.”

Christian slaves were not just to submit to the benevolent masters, for this would not be submission but compliance or assent. No, they were also to obey the unreasonable, crooked, perverse, unfair and cruel masters, for this is true submission, and it is this kind of action which really pleases God.

“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” (Eph. 6:5-6).

“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” (Col. 3:22-25).

It should be noted that Christianity does not support the institution of slavery, but neither does it condemn the practice. *“Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that” (1 Cor. 7:21)*. Christianity works on higher principles than human, social institutions, for the goal of every Christian should be to reach as many people as possible for Christ.

A Christian who becomes a social reformer may lose his testimony before men and this would keep him from the ultimate goal of reaching the world around him for Christ. However, we also know that wherever the gospel has gone in real force and power, it has not been long before the institution of slavery diminished or was destroyed, because the gospel first produces free men and women internally which ultimately results in free people externally.

No one we know today is a slave. At times we may feel we are slaves, but we are not by the Roman definition of the word. Yet, in a loose sense we are slaves (servants) because for forty or more hours a week our employers buy our time. If slaves were to be obedient to their masters, how much more so are employees to be obedient to their employers. Peter says we are to obey them, respect them, do what they ask, do more than they ask in order to show our Christian life makes us better employees. We are to do this even to those employers who seem to ignore us, who never say thanks, who never appreciate us, who treat us like “nobodies,” who blame us for things we never did, and who never encourage us when we are doing boring, mundane, monotonous and tedious tasks. The Bible says to submit and we will be greatly blessed by God and our testimonies before men will be positive and vital. Surely, Christians, we should give eight hours work for eight hours pay. We should not cheat or steal from our employers by being lazy.

While this passage is not speaking to employers, surely Christian employers should treat their employees fairly, kindly and reasonably, and never take advantage of them because they are fellow Christians. Employers should never oppress their employees (James 6:1-6).

When it says that labor is to be submissive to management it does not mean that laborers must be doormats, letting management take advantage of them. Most certainly an employee may negotiate with an unreasonable employer. Labor can ask for higher wages and plead for better working conditions. An employee has the right to leave an employer if the situation becomes unbearable and he cannot stay. However, it is generally not good to run away from a situation just because it is difficult, for God may want us to learn some valuable lessons we could not learn any other way. We may negotiate. We may seek to right things. If absolutely necessary, we may strike, but that should be our last resort, not our first. Yet, while we are negotiating, we Christians must show good conduct. We are not to moan, groan, complain, gripe, or curse. Nor are we to feel sorry for ourselves and display bitter, resentful, restless spirits and talk behind our employer’s back. We are to

obey and do it with a spirit of respect and honor. The natural reaction to unjust treatment is to strike back, but we must learn to rest all vengeance with God.

“Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY, SAY THE LORD. BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS UPON HIS HEAD.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19-21).

SUFFERING UNJUSTLY (2:19-20)

“For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience towards God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.”

When a slave obeys his master out of a good conscience towards God, even though the master is unreasonable and cruel, this finds favor or grace from God; that is, it highly pleases God.

If a Christian is doing his job well and gets grief from his boss, and the Christian takes it patiently, then this pleases God and the Christian will be blessed and have a fantastic testimony before men.

“For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure with patience?”

Peter is saying that if a Christian slave did wrong, if he sinned, then whatever punishment he received was deserved. The word “harshly” actually means “to slap, punch, or beat”—common punishment for slaves. Even if one endures this deserved punishment with patience, God is not impressed.

There is nothing noble about being reprimanded for doing a job poorly. That sort of suffering brings no credit.

“But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.”

The only sort of suffering which really counts is that which takes place when we have done everything we know to do, when we have gone the second and third miles, and we are still treated unjustly. If a slave was slapped, punched or beaten in unjust treatment, this was taken into account by God who would show His favor to this Christian slave.

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:10-12).

While it is not specifically stated, the implication is that this positive scriptural attitude by slaves, when they were treated unjustly, caused real anger in their masters so that Christian slaves were treated worse than unsaved slaves. The masters hated the Christ they saw in their slaves, but this gave the slaves an opportunity to display real love and grace.

“And just as you want men to treat you, treat them in the same way. And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same thing. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men” (Luke 6:31-35).

SUPREME EXAMPLE OF CHRIST (2:21-23)

“For you have been called for this purpose”

When these Christians first received Christ, they came to that point because of the divine, sovereign efficacious call to salvation. They were not only called to believe in Christ but also to follow Him, for through Him they were saved and through Him they were appointed to suffer. They were called to share in the sufferings of Christ. *“That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Phil. 3:10).*

Every Christian has been called to salvation and has been appointed by God to suffer unjustly.

“For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Phil. 1:29).

“So that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this” (1 Thess. 3:3).

It is through unjust suffering that the Christian truly learns to trust God. Suffering is a basic part of being a Christian so we should get used to it and learn to utilize the suffering so we can grow spiritually.

“Since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.”

Perhaps Peter’s readers were saying to themselves, “Well, he gives great theory, but Peter has never been a slave, nor has he ever suffered like us. Furthermore, he doesn’t know our masters and how impossible it is to work with them!”

Peter undoubtedly agreed with them, but he knew One who experienced more injustice than anyone else who ever lived, Jesus Christ. The suffering referred to is not His

atonement suffering but His physical suffering as a man leading up to His substitutionary, atoning sufferings.

No Christian can follow Christ as an example in atoning suffering; however, one can imitate Christ's life and physical sufferings while on earth. Christians are to take unjust suffering just as Christ took it from His persecutors and enemies. The word "example" is very interesting. It means "under-writing" or "to trace over" or "to make a carbon copy." This underwriting refers to the way writing was taught in Greek and Roman schools. The teacher would take a strip of papyrus or clay tablet and inscribe the letters of the alphabet as perfectly as he could across the top. The student would painstakingly follow the example of the teacher, trying to trace the letters underneath. Just as tracing takes such painstaking effort, so the Christian should endeavor to be like the Lord Jesus Christ in his own life.

When we want to know how to act as Christians when treated unjustly, then we should go back to the example of Christ, for He is our supreme pattern. We are also told to "follow in His steps." "To follow" means "to take the same road" or "to follow after diligently." Christians are to tread exactly behind Christ and place their feet precisely where His were. In short, this means we are to be Christ-like in our response to unjust suffering. *"The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:6).*

"Who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth."

This is a quote from the Old Testament. Peter goes back to Isaiah 53 to drive home how Jesus Christ was truly the Suffering Servant, the Messiah. It is significant that he should do this because his readers were also suffering servants, and to refer them to Christ, who had no equal or peer, would most certainly encourage them. When Jesus Christ was on trial before the Jews, the Pharisees, Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate, He never sinned. He never lied, never stretched the truth. He was the only honest man on Planet Earth. He never exaggerated, no matter how much they brainwashed Him, spat upon Him, mocked Him and beat Him. He did not sin with His lips or strike back in retaliation (Isa. 53:9).

"And while being reviled, He did not revile in return."

Christ had many sharp, biting, nasty things said against Him. He was the victim of perversions of truth, half-truths and lies which undoubtedly cut Him to the soul, but He did not talk back (Isa. 53:7). These slaves, therefore, were not to talk back to their cruel masters.

"He uttered no threats"

Jesus was innocent. He was without spot or blemish. He was tried, convicted, sentenced and put to death. All the charges were subjective or illegal. There was not one charge His accusers could make stick in a legal court. Jesus, however, never defended Himself, never justified Himself. He was never resentful and He never held grudges against His persecutors. He never said, "You will get yours, buddy, when I return in the Second Advent!" No, He said nothing and was like a lamb led to the slaughter. Christ is our example in how to handle unjust treatment of any kind. These slaves were not, therefore, to hold grudges against their unreasonable masters.

“But kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”

How was it possible for Christ to endure such unjust and cruel suffering? He kept entrusting or handing Himself over to God the Father who judges righteously and justly. He turned His case over to God. He did not try to defend Himself. He let God defend Him. He rested His fate in the hands of a sovereign God who would make right and set right all things.

These slaves were to learn to commit their cause to God who always judges righteously. God is sovereign and does what He pleases with men, and all unjust suffering has a definite purpose even if we do not see it immediately.

SUBSTITUTION TO PRODUCE RIGHTEOUS SAINTS (2:24)

“And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross”

Peter’s mind moves from the physical, non-atoning sufferings of Christ to the substitutionary, atoning sufferings of the Cross. Christ went through all of His physical sufferings so He could be a substitute for our sins. He endured shame, indignity and disgrace so He could die for sinners. He was slapped; His beard was pulled out; He was beaten unmercifully, so much so that He was beyond recognition. Yet, He uttered not a word because He knew He had to atone for the sins of lost men and women, and in these atoning sufferings, we cannot share because they are beyond our human comprehension.

When Christ died, He was not thinking of Himself but of others. These slaves were to think of others and their need of Christ before they thought of themselves.

“That we might die to sin and live to righteousness.”

The whole purpose Christ’s death was that the power of sin might be broken, not removed, in a Christian’s life and that the Christian might live a life of practical righteousness. These slaves could now deal with unjust and cruel treatment with loving patience and a caring attitude.

The cross provides the power to deal with our tendency to be self-defensive. When treated unjustly, the passions of the flesh (resentment, defensiveness, justification, vindictiveness and retaliation) can come to the surface so quickly. They begin to war with the soul and, if harbored, they can destroy a Christian’s personality and testimony. In ourselves, we do not have the power to deal with these passions, but in and through Christ we now do have the power. We can turn away from them, be it ever so difficult, because the power of Christ and the Cross is working in us.

“For by His wounds you were healed.”

The word “wounds” means “welts”; that is, stripes made by a whip where the cords have attached to them little pieces of brass or bone which tear the skin and leave a bloody mass of flesh, leaving even the veins and bowels exposed. This whole context is speaking about spiritual healing for sins and not physical healing of diseases. It is a spiritual healing from sins.

When we feel we are being unjustly treated, the greatest healing must take place within us because we feel so hurt or subtly angered. When we realize that Christ died to heal us spiritually, this helps us to come to grips with bitterness, resentment and anger when we think we have been wronged, mistreated or unjustly dealt with.

SHEPHERD AND GUARDIAN (2:25)

“For you were continually straying like sheep”

Peter reminds his readers of what they were like before they became Christians. They all were lost sheep with absolutely no purpose in life. They were continually going astray because they were lost in sin. They were following their own uncertain paths. They had no protection from sin and were exposed to every kind of danger.

Even these Asian Christians, with all their trials and difficulties, would have to admit they were better off under Christ than when they were without Him. Now they had a hope of heaven and the definite purpose of glorifying Christ while on this earth.

“But now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.”

Before conversion to Christ, these slaves were fighting their own battles, going it alone, wandering aimlessly with no hope, for life would be despairing to one who knew the drudgery and monotony of slavery. But then they turned to the Lord Jesus, who is both Shepherd and Guardian of their souls. As the Great Shepherd, Christ cares for, protects and fights for His people. As the Great Guardian, He is overseeing every detail of each individual Christian. He knows and sees all that happens to them, even those who are being unjustly treated.

Christians have a God who cares and understands and He is vitally interested in the needs of His people, especially when they are being treated unfairly and unjustly.

CONCLUSION

Are you a straying sheep? Are you lost in sin? Do you wander aimlessly through life not knowing for what purpose you are on this earth? Are you going down blind paths which lead you to despair and uncertainty? If you sense you are a lost sheep, I urge you to admit that your condition is due to sin. You need a Savior. You need forgiveness and eternal life. You need to discover the real purpose for living, and only Christ can show it to you. I plead with you to trust Christ as your Savior and Lord so you can be converted and return to the Shepherd and Guardian of your soul, even Christ Jesus the Lord.