

The Christian in a Hostile World

Excelling at work

Intro: In the first century there were over 6 million slaves. Often a third of the city populations were made up of them; and it is probable that a great number of the Christians of the first century were slaves.

As workers for their masters, they were an integral part of the ancient Roman economy. They supplied the labor for production in the ancient world. Albert Bell comments in “Exploring the NT World” that advocating the abolition of slavery in the NT world would be the equivalent of someone today campaigning for the prohibition of automobiles.”

What would Peter command these people who worked so hard and at times were so greatly mistreated? We may be surprised at Peter's exhortation:

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. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself ^abore our sins in His body on the ^bcross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:18-25)

Peter did not command Christians to stand in the streets decrying the evils of slavery. Nor did he command them to break free from their masters or find a way to repay them for their mistreatment. Instead he encouraged them to be the best slaves they could be in order to lead others to the Lord.

Thus, slaves were told:

OBEY YOUR MASTERS

Servants, be submissive with all respect...

The word is not the common word for “slave” (doulos), but a word meaning “household servant” or what might be called “domestics.”

Be submissive translates the same word found to the citizen earlier. it means to place oneself under the authority of another.

The servant is commanded to place himself voluntarily under the authority of his master, to obey him "with all respect."

The NT has many similar exhortations that corroborate and amplify this text.

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)

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. (1 Tim.6:1-2)

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. (Tit. 2:9-10)

OBEY THE DIFFICULT AS WELL AS THE KIND

not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.

Agathos (benevolent, kind, generous)

Epieikes (equitable, fair, or mild)

Skolios (crooked, from which we get the disease called "scoliosis").

Here it is used figuratively for the master who is "perverse, wicked, unfair, or surly.

Peter gives a reason for his exhortation.

SUFFERING FOR THE SAKE OF WHAT IS RIGHT FINDS FAVOR WITH GOD

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. (1 Pet. 2:19-20)

His question is a pragmatic or practical one. What "fame" or reputation (credit) would one have if he endures mistreatment (the word conveys the idea of being "cuffed") for doing wrong?! And what if one endures that patiently? No credit in that, since this could be regarded as punishment deserved for the wrong behavior committed.

But if one does right and suffers for it, then this finds favor with God. This is "thankworthy", that is, it is commendable, beyond the ordinary.

The servants reading Peter's words might ask, "But why?" Why would God look with favor toward such an act? Why should I endure the mistreatment of my master when I didn't do anything wrong? That's just not fair!

SUFFERING FOR THE SAKE OF WHAT IS RIGHT IS A PART OF OUR CALLING IN FOLLOWING JESUS

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself ^abore our sins in His body on the ^bcross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:21--25

We must endure suffering, because we are following Jesus who suffered for us.

His suffering is an example for us.

Peter uses a word meaning "underwriting" or "template."

Something that is to be traced over.

We are to follow in his steps or the tracks he has left.

He did not deserve those sufferings

WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH;

Peter borrows the words of the "suffering servant" of Isaiah to describe Jesus. He was innocent of all wrong-doing. He violated no law of God; nor did He even say anything that might be dishonest.

He did not retaliate against His oppressors

and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats,

In Jesus' sufferings he would have had ample opportunity to lash out at His persecutors. When they reviled Him, he could have reviled them in turn. He could have sought to put off their meanness by threatening, "Someday you will pay for this!" But he did none of that.

He kept trusting in the Lord.

but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;

He endured all that He did because He trusted God to deliver Him. Enduring difficulty is a great expression of trust in God. It affirms that in spite of how others may treat us, we will do right and look to Him for our reward.

It is also a trust that He will render vengeance on those who are evil and impenitent.

He suffered for the salvation of others.

and He Himself ^abore our sins in His body on the ^bcross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:21--25

bore our sins—"Carried up" a ritual term (cf. Lev. 14:20; Jas. 2:21)

Took a curse upon Himself--this is the significance of the tree (Cf. Deut. 21:23)

By His wound you were healed. Imagine the impact on a slave who received undeserved stripes from his master to hear, "by his stripes you were healed." How well they knew the pain!

Yet, Jesus endured that for them!

That while we were sinners:

Wander is from planeo, the word from which we get planet!

But now we have returns to Jesus, our shepherd and overseer!

APPLYING PETER'S WORDS TODAY

It is always important to recognize that when we read Scripture we are reading other people's mail. And as I say that I don't mean at all to suggest that it is not written for us. It is! But we need to read it in its original context to know how we should apply it.

In this case Peter addresses a group of people who no longer exist in our culture. None of us find ourselves inescapably in the power of someone else as the slave or domestic of the first century. He could not in most cases change his circumstances. For the most part, we can. Peter's concern is how do Christians fit into the order of society as it existed in his world. And to that end, he urges the slaves to obey their masters and to accept even their mistreatment rather than run away or seek to retaliate.

Though not identical to slavery in many respects, we may apply Peter's teaching to our work life.

As Christians we need a mindset of excellence in everything we do. Someone once defined excellence this way, "doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way!"

If there is any area where we need to strive for excellence, it is at work. Christians should be the best workers.

Someone once made me aware that someone might think they are fulfilling God's purpose for Christians at work by standing idle with their tools in their pockets talking to someone about the Bible.

But is this what God would have us do? We fulfill our purpose not by having Bible discussions with fellow-workers on the boss's dime, but by being the best employee we can be. And then after showing ourselves obedient to God, using whatever occasions we may have to influence others where that is permissible (in the break room or at lunch, etc.)

We too may suffer for doing what is right.

There may be times that our best efforts are "rewarded" with ingratitude, poor compensation, or even mistreatment.

Of course, we are free to find another job; but if not, we must also patiently endure that mistreatment, remembering the example of the Lord.

In principle Peter teaches us that suffering for what is right is a part of our calling and thus opens up the possibility that we may suffer at the hands of others without vengeance or retaliation.

In a world that always demands justice, such teaching may appear naive and stupid. Some would say, "I'm not taking anything off of anybody." But what if Jesus Christ had said that?

There will be times when we have no recourse but to suffer in doing what is right. We can do so in the faith that God is the ultimate judge and that He is pleased with our faithfulness.

Conclusion: Peter's exhortations contain a timely message for us today. And they give us direction when life is painful for us. Let us be reminded of all that the Lord endured for us and follow in His footsteps.