

## SERMONS ON 1 PETER

**Suffering with Christ:  
Embrace Cruciform Existence  
(1 Pet 2:18-25)**

Jerry Truex; April 20, 2008

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### A. Introduction

Peter is writing to Christians—the *Christianoi* (4:16)—who had recently moved to Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Peter calls them “resident aliens and strangers” (2:11). We don’t know why they moved to Asia Minor, but the terms “resident aliens and strangers” indicate they were landless people from abroad, perhaps refugees. They were day-laborers at best and slaves at worst.

Furthermore, the *Christianoi* were suffering. The term “suffering” arises twenty-two times in 1 Peter. They were suffering the typical abuses that slaves and immigrants experience, but more than that, they were been ridiculed as followers of Christ (4:14-16).

In chapter two, Peter exhorts the *Christianoi* in two ways. First, he tells them to submit to civil authorities—he mentions the king (Caesar) and governors. Then Peter shifts focus to the domestic realm and gives a second exhortation. Look at 1 Pet 2:18.

### B. The Exhortation (2:18)

<sup>18</sup> Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. (NRSV)

Peter addresses the slaves (*oiketai*). These are household servants.<sup>1</sup> He encourages them to “accept the authority of your masters.” The word for accept is *hypotasso*, which means “be subject to” or “be subordinate to” or “line up with.”

#### 1. Slavery

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<sup>1</sup> These are servant belonging to the household (*oikos*). So John H. Elliot, *1 Peter. The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 513.

A major issue we need to address is *the nature of slavery* in the ancient world. The institutionalized form of slavery we had in the U.S. differed dramatically from first-century slavery.<sup>2</sup>

In the ancient world, about one-third of all people were in some form of slavery.<sup>3</sup> There were various reasons why there were so many slaves, including: (a) centuries of warfare and enslavement of conquered people, (b) enslavement due to oppressive taxation and debts, (c) abduction and sale into slavery, (d) birth into slavery, (e) voluntary enslavement for those who preferred slavery over vagabond existence of finding odd jobs, and (f) voluntary enslavement as a way to gain Roman citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

The economic system in the Greco-Roman was anchored in the institution of slavery. In the ancient world, there was a wide range of types of slavery: doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea-captains.<sup>5</sup> For example, the great stoic philosopher, Epictetus (b. 55 AD), was born into slavery. "Slaves had the status and power that was connected with their masters."<sup>6</sup> So slavery was taken for granted in the ancient world.

Still, slavery was not a good thing. Slaves in the ancient world were "regarded and treated as chattel, they were branded, mutilated, castrated, raped, and subjected to the will and whim of their masters, including their physical and sexual abuse."<sup>7</sup> They were the lowest rank in society.

## 2. Why submit to masters?

Why does Peter recommend submission to masters? There might be two reasons.

### (1) Survival

First, it was a matter of survival. They "needed a job" to put it contemporary terms. But more than that, if Christians across the Roman Empire rebelled against the slave system, the Roman authorities probably would have wiped out the early Christian

<sup>2</sup> McKnight, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 165. Citing the work of Scott Bartchy (170), unlike the slavery in the US, ancient slavery was not based on racial factors, education was encouraged, slaves had responsible social functions, they could own property (even other slaves), they shared religious traditions with their masters, no laws prohibited the public assembly of slaves, and they could anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.

<sup>3</sup> Elliot mentions that there were 5-6 million free citizens in Roman Italy and about 1-2 million slaves during the first century. *1 Peter* (2000) 514.

<sup>4</sup> Elliot, *1 Peter* (2000) 514; McKnight *1 Peter* (1996) 165.

<sup>5</sup> McKnight, *1 Peter* (1996) 166.

<sup>6</sup> McKnight, *1 Peter* (1996) 165.

<sup>7</sup> Elliot, *1 Peter* (2000) 514.

movement.<sup>8</sup> The survival of the individual and the survival of the entire movement were at stake.

## (2) Supernatural witness

Second, it was a supernatural witness. Peter wanted the Christian slaves to show that their behavior transcended the norms of society.<sup>9</sup> They are to be good and obedient workers, even if their masters are cruel and despotic. In this way, they testify to God's grace and justice.

In addition to survival and witnessing to God, Peter offers an explicit motivation in verses 19-20. Why submit?

### C. The Motivation (2:19-20)

<sup>19</sup> For it is a credit [grace; *charis*] to you if, being aware [mindful; *syneidēsis*] of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup> If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit [*kleos*] is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval [grace; *charis*]. (NRSV)

<sup>9</sup> My grace [*charis*] is sufficient for you; my power [*dynamis*] is made perfect in weakness. (2 Cor 12:9; NRSV).

#### 1. It is grace [*charis*] to you

Here is the motivation for submitting: It is divine grace to/for you, if you endure pain while suffering unjustly. The NRSV has "It is a credit to you." However, the *charis*, which is translated "credit," is usually translated "grace". *Charis* or grace refers to God's gift or God's action. Grace (*charis*) is synonymous with power (*dynamis*).<sup>10</sup> See 2 Cor 12:9 above.

So, I think Peter is saying, "Divine grace or divine power is available to you, if you endure pain for suffering unjustly." God's grace comes to those who suffer unjustly. That's why at the end of verse 20, Peter says basically the same thing: "If you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval (*charis*)."

#### 2. Mindful of God

<sup>8</sup> Spartacus led a slave revolt from 73-70 BCE, which was eventually put down, resulting in 6000 slaves being crucified along the Appian Way from Capua to Rome.

<sup>9</sup> So Scot McKnight, *1 Peter* (1996) 163.

<sup>10</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Theology of the Apostle Paul* (London: T & T Clark, 1998) 320ff.

But to receive the divine grace or power, Peter says you need to be aware of God—that is, God grace is present when we suffer, but we need to perceive it for it to benefit us. That’s why Peter says: “being aware [*syneidēsis*] of God” or “be mindful of God.”<sup>11</sup>

The Greek word, *syneidēsis*, refers to *being aware of or mindful of* God. It implies knowledge of God and sensitivity to the divine will.<sup>12</sup> So Peter is saying, you will experience divine grace or power when you suffer unjustly, if you are mindful of God.

### 3. Just and unjust suffering

Peter also makes a distinction between *just* and *unjust* suffering. Often people suffer unjustly because, in doing good, they threaten unjust power brokers in the various social and institutional systems, who then retaliate. People living just and responsible lives often upset the system and then pay the price!

Peter says that God’s grace is available for those who suffering unjustly. Perhaps you have been a good and diligent worker, but you get fired because of false allegations. You suffer for that. Peter says God’s grace is there for you.

But, suppose you were caught stealing from your boss and you are suffering from unemployment—then then Peter would say there’s no credit (*kleos*) in that (v. 20). That kind of suffering has no merit.

However, notice that Peter uses a different word “credit” (*kleos*) and not “grace” (*charis*). Peter is careful to use a different word, leaving open the possibility that grace is available even for those who suffer justly.

### 4. Mindfulness

I want to make one more comment on mindfulness. In Buddhist practice, mindfulness refers to paying attention so as to be more aware of the present moment and all that is here now, without judgment. Mindfulness is a detached observation, awareness without making judgments.

With mindfulness, you look at your pain and suffering in a detached way—in a matter of fact way—rather than looking at the world through your pain and suffering. When you are able to detach yourself from your pain and

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<sup>11</sup> Elliot, *1 Peter* (2000) 519.

<sup>12</sup> Elliot, *1 Peter* (2000) 519.

suffering—even for a brief moment—you transcend yourself ever so slightly. We experience the pain, we explore it, but in a detached manner, so that you might say, “Yes, I have pain, but I am not suffering.”

In those brief moments of self-transcendence suffering is reduced. We position ourselves to see from God’s perspective. When we transcend our “self,” we realize that we are not simply a solitary individual, but we sense our unity with the One who absorbs and dissipates suffering as an ocean to a drop of water. This is to receive and experience the grace (*charis*) or divine power that Peter promises.

#### **D. The Foundation (2:21-25)**

Next Peter articulates the foundation for receiving divine grace.

<sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. (NRSV)

Notice that Peter says that suffering is a calling from God (v. 21). And he adds one more thing: The call to suffer (unjustly) is rooted in following Jesus. “Jesus also suffered and his pattern of life [his example] is to become their pattern.”<sup>13</sup> Here we get a glimpse into an early Christian interpretation of Christ’s life and, at the same time, a statement summarizing the essence of the Christian life.

##### **1. Christ’s example (*hypogrammos*)**

Notice that the suffering of Christ created an example. The Greek word for “example” is *hypogrammos*, which refers to a wax tablet on which children wrote in order to learn the alphabet. The letters were impressed in the wax so the children could shape their letters properly.<sup>14</sup>

Just as children followed the impression in the wax, so we are to follow the footsteps of Christ. To follow someone’s footsteps was a metaphor for “going behind someone, becoming that person’s student, and thereby participating in his destiny.”<sup>15</sup> So, in the early church, “Following Jesus came to be a standard way of speaking of a commitment to trust Jesus, to learn from him, and when persecuted,” to suffer with him and thereby participate in Jesus’ destiny.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> McKnight, *1 Peter* (1996) 167.

<sup>14</sup> McKnight, *1 Peter* (1996) 168.

<sup>15</sup> Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 205.

<sup>16</sup> Erland Waltner, *1 Peter. Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scotdale: Herald, 1999) 92.

We are to follow the general pattern of Christ's life. What was the pattern that Peter saw?

## 2. Jesus' pattern of life

<sup>22</sup> "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." <sup>23</sup> When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. (NRSV)

Peter presents Jesus as someone who suffered for doing good. He borrows some of the wording from Isaiah 53, regarding the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, and applies them to Jesus. He did not sin. He did not harm others, but healed them. Most importantly, Peter points out that Jesus did not retaliate.

- He didn't insult others when he was slandered.
- He didn't return abuse for abuse.
- He didn't threaten others when he was threatened.

Rather than retaliate, Jesus trusted God. He trusted that God would judge justly —and as we have seen elsewhere in the NT, we are judged according to our deeds, whether good or bad, even though we are saved by grace (Rom 2:1-11). So Jesus leaves judging to God.

Next, Peter elaborates the benefits of Christ's suffering.

## 3. Christ's vicarious suffering

<sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. (NRSV)

Peter again takes words from Isaiah 53:4-5 and applies them to Jesus. In this way, Peter argues that Jesus' death on the cross was not just an example; it was also redemptive; Jesus' death saved us or heals us.

For Peter, Jesus' death was *vicarious*; that is, Jesus was our *substitute*. He suffered and died for us. Consequently, followers of Jesus can be liberated from the compulsion to do wrong (free from sins) and are empowered to live justly (live for righteousness).

Peter sums up Christ's vicarious suffering with a terse quote from Isa 53:5: "By his wounds (bruise; *mōlōpi*) you have been healed (*iathēte*)." The reference to bruises for wounds reminds us of the harsh treatment the

slaves received at the hands of cruel masters. The word “healed” (*iaomai*) refers to physical healing, but metaphorically it refers more broadly to the life of righteousness (2:24)—of wholeness and right relationship with God, others, and one self.

## E. Reflections

### 1. A favorite passage for Anabaptists

1 Peter 2:21—“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps”—has been one of the most important verses for Anabaptists, because it’s a succinct statement about what it means to follow Christ.

Dirk Philips, an early Dutch Anabaptist leader, makes more than forty references to this section of 1 Peter (*Enchiridion*). The Martyrs Mirror—which is a large book of line drawing of Anabaptists martyrs during the 16<sup>th</sup> century—is laced with quotations from this part of 1 Peter.

Menno Simmons, Michael Sattler, Pilgram Marpeck, Balthasare Hubmaier, Jerome Segers, and Pieter Pieterzoon frequently quote 1 Peter 2:18-25 in their writings.<sup>17</sup>

### 2. Cruciform existence

Peter encourages us to aspire to *cruciform existence*. That is, the suffering of Christ is a paradigm of Christian existence. Christ suffered unjustly, not only in death on the cross, but also in life. If we are to imitate Jesus in a world that is unjust and unfair, Cruciform existence is our destiny.

### 3. Testify to God’s grace

Christ suffered in order to testify to God’s grace and power. How can we do this?

(1) In the business world, it means not operating according to greed, where material gain is the highest value. We suffer when we don’t play the greed game. We have less. We are viewed as foolish.

(2) In our relationships, Christ is our example. He took the form of a suffering servant and did not count equality with God something to be

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<sup>17</sup> Waltner, *1 Peter* (1999) 107-9.

grasped (Phil 2:5-8). This means we should not seek fame and celebrity. It means serving others more than demanding our rights.

(3) In our interior life, it means practicing the mindfulness of God, being aware of God grace and power right here-and-now. And I have suggested practicing Buddhist forms of mindfulness—observing our lives in a rather detached way—not only liberates us from attachments possessions, pleasure, or power, but might help us be more aware of God.

#### **4. Employer-employee relations**

Early Christian slaves had little option, but to submit. That social condition no longer operates in our employer-employee world. Still, some of Peter's advice to slaves applies to our situation.

Just as Peter exhorted Christian slaves to submit to masters to gain God's approval, Peter would probably exhort us to submit to the contractual agreement we make with employers. We keep our obligations as workers, bosses, employees, or employers by a desire to do God's will.

Of course, if it is contractually sound to protest certain work conditions—racial discrimination—then it is acceptable for a Christian to protest such practice and still be in submission to the employment conditions.