

Freedom to Serve

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Date: 03 July 2016

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[0 : 00] Thanks be to God. If you have not had a chance to turn your Bibles to 1 Peter 2 yet, please do so now. Chapter 2, verses 18-25.

We have been going through the book of 1 Peter, and within the book of 1 Peter, we're kind of in a mini-series within the book about talking about our freedom in Christ and how that leads us to one we talked about last week's submit to human institutions, including governing authorities, and this week about our freedom to serve and being subject even to masters or employers that we might have.

And so this is 1 Peter 2, 18-25. And in his book, *Liberating the Laity*, Paul Stevens, an author, writes about how most lay Christians, so not pastors or ministers, but lay Christians that go to church and go to other church events and such, will spend about 3,000 to 4,000 hours with church people in church functions.

But compare that to the fact that the same people spend 60,000 to 80,000 hours at their workplace. So that's a huge imbalance there, and I don't mean that in the sense that you need to spend as much time with church as you do at work.

But what is important is that that means the important part of Christian discipleship has to be about our workplace, how we conduct ourselves in the workplace. And unfortunately, as people who study this stuff at London Institute for Contemporary Theology, they say that 98% of Christians are not equipped or envisioned for living as Christians in the workplace.

[1 : 50] So that means most Christians are invited or recruited to use their volunteer hours serving at church when really for most of their lives, their work hours, they are not really serving Christ and living for Christ and have not been equipped and envisioned to do so.

But Scripture not only addresses how we have to live personally as Christians or within the context of the church, but also how we have to live and behave in society and the workplace as well.

And that's what Peter talks about here in this passage. And he wants to teach us that we ought to, as believers, serve God in the workplace by doing good while suffering, just as Christ did good and suffered for us.

So that's the big idea that Peter tries to get across to us in this passage. And he starts in verse 18. So read with me there. It says, Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.

As I mentioned, last week we talked about submitting to human institutions and the same word was used. Be subject for the Lord's sake, it said, to every human institution. And he's telling now slaves, household slaves, at the time it was written, to be subject to their masters with all respect.

[3 : 09] And now at this point you're probably asking, okay, so how does this have anything to do with our work? I mean, they're talking to slaves. He's talking to... And secondly, why does Peter say nothing about the evil of slavery and instead tell slaves to be subject even to unjust masters?

So that might be a question that you might be asking. And I will address both of these questions in turn. So you probably have heard it said that the Bible is bigoted and regressive because it doesn't address things like slavery that most modern people agree is evil and that it doesn't criticize it as evil, that the Bible doesn't.

However, I want to point out that the slavery in the Greco-Roman world is very different from the slavery that we think of. When we hear the word slavery, we immediately think of 17th, 18th, 19th century slavery, right?

The New World slavery. But that's very different from that. So there's a book called *Slave of Christ* by a biblical scholar named Murray Harris where he writes about slaves in the Greco-Roman times.

And he writes, first of all, that the slaves in the Greco-Roman world were totally indistinguishable from the rest of the people in society. By how they looked, by how they dressed, you know, how they walked about in the streets, they were completely indistinguishable from the rest of society. [4 : 25] But in contrast, the New World slavery, right, its slaves were distinguishable because it was race-based, right? It was all African Americans or people taken from another place.

That was not the case. The slavery in this Greco-Roman world was not race-based. And then secondly, slavery in the Greco-Roman world was different because the slaves were often highly educated.

Sometimes they were even more educated than their masters. But they just turned to tough financial times, whatever, and they sold themselves into this position so that they can work, have a means of living.

And for that reason, they often held managerial positions and were able to make enough money to often buy themselves out of slavery again. In contrast, New World slavery, right, slaves were reduced to menial and manual labor, right?

And they were forced to work pretty much for the rest of their lives. There was no guarantee of manumission, right? They could not buy themselves out in most cases, right?

[5 : 25] And finally, as I mentioned, the Greco-Roman slaves sometimes sold themselves into, put themselves in that situation because that was better than living in poverty or whatever they were in.

But in the New World, the slaves were not, didn't become slaves voluntarily. Rather, they were forced into slavery through kidnapping, right? Which is roundly condemned by both the Old and the New Testament.

1 Timothy 1, 9, Deuteronomy 24, 7. So it was not justifiable in any way, right? So that's, it's very different. And now I don't say this just to justify slavery in biblical times, but I say this to give you a picture so that you recognize that it's not an equal comparison when you criticize the Bible on the basis of New World slavery, right?

Because that was a completely different situation. And even though it's, and we may, we'll still agree that slavery in this time is wrong as well because it's not right for one human being made in the image of God to own another human being made in the image of God, right?

So it's that the humans are not intended to be property, right? And even in this time, even though the slaves were much better off in the Greco-Roman world, they were still considered property. And Peter begins to challenge some of the cultural understanding of slavery as well.

[6 : 40] And we know this because how he begins verse 18. He says, servants, right? He's directly addressing servants. That's, that's, he's saying, he's talking to them.

He's speaking to them. And Greek philosophers, for example, Aristotle, wrote about how slaves cannot think deliberately, right? They wrote about the fact that slaves, therefore, should not be addressed, but rather should be addressed through their masters, right?

Peter is not buying any of that. He's speaking directly to the slaves and affirming their dignity and saying, I have something to say to you, right? God has something to say to you, right?

And in addition to that, right, the slaves in this culture were expected to subscribe to the religion, faith of their masters. They didn't have a choice, right?

But here, Peter clearly assumes that these slaves would be following God regardless of where the masters' religious allegiance lay. lay, right? So he's, again, affirming the dignity of slaves, even in this culture.

[7 : 43] So he's beginning to challenge that. And then finally, we have to remember that Christians in the Roman Empire did not have the political clout that we now have, people living in a democratic United States of America where we can vote or we can lead, we can protest.

They, I mean, they would have been executed or, you know, they would have been quelled immediately. So they did not have the political means to affect the kind of change that we saw in this world.

And theologian Miroslav Wolf observes about this situation. He says, The call to follow the crucified Messiah was, in the long run, much more effective in changing the unjust political, economic, and familial structures than direct exhortations to revolutionize them would ever happen.

For an allegiance to the crucified Messiah, indeed, worship of a crucified God is an eminently political act that subverts a politics of dominion at its very core.

You guys follow that? So what he's saying is that as Christians we're called to serve and be subject to and to suffer in the pattern of a crucified Christ because Christ himself submitted, he became subject to and suffered on our behalf.

[8 : 54] And because of that, that kind of mentality, that kind of mindset and attitude in the way we live radically subverts the politics of domination, power over another being. Right?

So in doing this and in teaching these things, Peter is subverting the structure from the bottom up. He's laying the moral and the spiritual groundwork necessary for any kind of social and political change.

Right? So you see this in what Peter is doing. So he goes on, once again, verse 18, servants speaking to them, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.

This is particularly relevant for believers because slaves occupied the lowest, you know, social stratum in Greco-Roman society. But Peter had just told everybody that he's writing to in verse 16, earlier chapter 1, verse 16, live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants.

The word is slaves of God. Right? Regardless of your social status, whether you're a noble or whether you're a slave or whether you're an emperor, as a Christian, you are a slave of God, he says.

[10 : 10] Right? And because of this, this actual slaves in the Roman Empire becomes the paradigm, the example, the pattern. Right? That all Christians cannot identify with because we're all the slaves of God.

And this is not a sign of our enslavement. Rather, it's a sign of our freedom because we belong to God and only those who truly belong to God can be free because God alone is Lord over all things and for us to be enslaved to anything else would be true slavery.

And because Christians are slaves first and foremost to God, it's not human authority, the authority of these masters that demands our allegiance, but it's the fact that it's God's authority.

It's the fact that we're loyal to God that we are supposed to be subject to their masters. And that's what the phrase with all respect refers to. Literally, actually, the phrase with all respect can be translated in all fear.

Right? And now that I say fear, some of you guys who have been here for the whole series already, it rings a bell because you've heard the word fear several times mentioned. In chapter 2, verse 17, Peter said, honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, and honor the emperor.

[11 : 21] Right? Chapter 1, verse 17, he said, and if you call on him as father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.

This fear is not a terrifying fear. Rather, it's a reverential awe that the idea of living constantly every moment of your life before the face of God, the fact that the God, the impartial judge, is watching. Right? And that changes the way we live. Right? That's the kind of fear that he's talking about. And because he repeatedly says, 1 Peter, the Bible never exhorts us to be fearful of men. Never tells us to fear men.

It only tells us fear God. So when he says, be subject to your masters in all fear, with all respect. He's saying, don't be subject to your masters because you fear that master.

Be subject to your masters because you fear God. Right? That's why in verse 19 he continues, for this is a gracious thing when mindful, of who? Mindful of God, not mindful of men, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

[12 : 25] Right? It's because we're mindful of God that we're supposed to be subject even to unjust masters. Right? If we were being subject to the masters for their own merit or their own deserving, then we wouldn't be subject to the unjust ones.

But because we're doing it on the basis of God's authority and his call on our lives, we are to be subject even to the unjust masters. Right? And this is a gracious thing before God.

It's, it's, it's, God shows favor. He's gracious toward those who are suffering in this way and being subject to human masters. And, and because the slavery in the context of the Greco-Roman Empire was different, it's kind of more like indentured servanthood than slavery that we know of.

We can rightly apply it to our workplace. Right? Because we're, we're called to be subject to all human institutions as we learned in the last passage and we are really beholden to our employers.

They, they pay us. Right? Where we owe them a certain allegiance and a loyalty. We're supposed to serve them. We're supposed to work for them. Right? And so in this context if we could, we could apply this passage to that for, to our workplace for that reason.

[13 : 38] And he tells us in verse 20 that we are to serve God in the workplace by suffering while doing good. Right? So he continues look with me at verse 20. 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. Once again he's saying it's a gracious thing in the sight of God. Did you catch that? So there's, the Bible's not giving us any excuses for getting punished for doing bad things.

Right? I mean he's saying like what credit is it to you if you sin and are beaten for it? I mean if you sin and are beaten for it then you deserve it. Right? He's saying that's not to our credit. Right? So he's, it's not and plenty of people get punished at workplace for doing bad things.

Right? For negligence, for rudeness or for lack of accountability or maybe even deceit or fraud or just simple incompetence.

Right? So these things are not what Peter has in mind. He's not saying well if you get punished for doing bad things then yeah you deserve that. But, but as Christians we are to do good and suffer on account of that.

[14 : 41] While doing good we're supposed to endure unjust suffering. Then what does it mean to do good in the workplace? And we learned lastly he told us to do good in the context of society as well.

We learned that doing good involves not just doing something that is good only to Christians but doing good that is recognized there's a common recognition by society at large as well is good.

Right? So that they also the world also sees that it is good. There will be some conflict of interest there will be some conflict in values but there are things that we hold in common that the Christians would uphold as good that the world also sees as good.

And likewise in the workplace I think a similar idea is in play. In fact I think it goes back all the way to Genesis 1 when God creates all things he creates the universe he says it is good.

Right? And at the end of all creation as he rejoices over all creation he says it is very good. Right? So then our work everything that we do is to be patterned after what God did in Genesis 1 to do to create what is good.

[15 : 46] Right? And let me unpack what this means because as Christians it's so easy to just think about okay so that means now I need to go into the workplace make sure I have my Bible out on my desk and make sure every time I get an opportunity I evangelize.

Right? And that's not I don't think what this doing good is referring to. In fact there's a really well done film from 1999 called The Big Kahuna and has anyone seen that?

I guess that's pretty old. Yeah. It's it has it's Kevin Spacey in it it's spectacularly acted. It's about three salesmen of industrial lubricants and they go on a business trip to Wichita in Kansas and they go and there's this big kahuna at the conference and he's the president of this large company and they need to land a deal with this guy.

Right? And the way the circumstances pan out it turns out that only one of them of the three has an actual opportunity to even meet this guy this big kahuna and unfortunately that one guy is a first time business trip it's his first time business trip and he happens to be a born again Christian and that's how he's described and he's very sincere in one way and he goes into the meeting and he comes back and these other two guys are waiting and there's I mean they get up immediately as he comes into the door oh so did you get to meet him?

And he says yes I did so well did you talk to him? He's like yes I did and they're starting to get frustrated and they say so I mean what did you guys talk about?

[17 : 29] And his name is Bob what did you talk about Bob? And then Bob hesitating continues and he says we talked about Christ and after a long weighty silence one of the guys Larry asks with a look of utter disbelief you talked about Jesus?

He's shocked and frustrated and he quips back did you mention perhaps what line of lubricants Jesus would have endorsed? And what did you say to him Bob?

Larry says and as the conversation goes on Bob admits that the president never brought up the subject of Jesus he did and he never brought up the subject of industrial lubricants and the conversation gets heated and at some point Bob also gets exasperated and he says I understand

Larry I just don't see the crime and speaking to another human being as another human being I couldn't mention work or lubricants or anything like that because I didn't want him to think that I was using the subject of religion to cozy up to him to get him to sign some contract I didn't want him to think that I was insincere and then Larry says this back to him but you were insincere Bob in a much greater sense the company sent us here they said Bob Larry Phil why don't you go down to Wichita for a couple of days don't worry about your room and board we'll take care of that and for a couple of days Bob we become the hands of the company shaking all the other hands before us what you did the reason why you were insincere is that you cut off that bond it would be like the hand breaking itself off from the arm and saying oh I got this other thing going on out here that has nothing to do with you right

Bob is devastated he was a sincere believer but he was an insincere employee right I don't think that's what God has in mind for us but he says do good while suffering at work he wants us to flourish in the workplace he wants us to do good in the work he doesn't want us to be an ineffective employee in fact there's ethical questions to be brought into that as well since he's getting paid to do a certain thing and during that paid time he was doing something that he was not supposed to do right and he wasn't even an effective witness right because he lost the credibility before his co-workers and he became a sales pitch because he steered a conversation to go to that as opposed to really caring for that person loving him in the context of relationship sharing the gospel with that person right but I would also challenge that that this then means we should just leave our faith at home and then go do good work work hard and that's what the enlightenment thinking would have us think right the enlightenment worldview separates the facts of the public sector from the values of the private sector right they say in your workplace do everything according to the facts don't bring any of your values which are private and personal and relative here right but that's a completely unreasonable and just an unfeasible thing to do because everybody brings values everybody lives out of their values and we can't as Christians let the facts of the business world of the bottom line of profit you know and trump our

Christian values of integrity right and charity and equity right and it's profit is a good thing right and when you make profit as a business you're able to compensate your employees and your investors well and when you work for a good company with a good purpose then you're producing good you're producing doing a common good for the service of mankind so profit itself in and of itself is not a bad thing but when that becomes the purpose when that becomes the driving factor in our work that can lead to dehumanizing bureaucracies it could lead to dead end jobs it could lead to bad customer service it could lead to all kinds of bad work right so as Christians we can uniquely contribute to that do good while suffering because we have this this the gospel perspective on the world same thing if you're a Christian in education right and sometimes the temptation is to idolize education itself as the panacea the thing that will solve all evils in society as long as people are more educated then everything will be better right but we know better than that as believers don't we because we know the gospel and we know that the deep root sin at the root sin is the cause of all social ills the broken homes the inequitable distribution of funds in schools right all of this and because of that we're able to have a more properly pessimistic and more properly optimistic view of education right because we know that God is redeeming all creation we can serve in light of that and offer the hope of forgiveness and accountability and create a culture of mutual accountability in our education and also Christian educators as because we have the gospel perspective we can remember that self-knowledge and self-discipline and virtue can't be neglected right at the expense of getting trained so that you can be a better wage earner right the gospel perspective changes that and as we do that we might suffer right and Christians in business might suffer when you live when you work with integrity and you work and do good in your workplace you might suffer in your bottom line in your profits and you might even get punished by your employees in education as well when you try to offer a more holistic education in investing in the kids and teaching values teaching them not only to be better wage earners or technicians but teaching them also to be better citizens when you do that you could also get punished right you could suffer unjustly but when you do this is a gracious thing when mindful of God one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly

[23 : 32] I mean obviously I can't go through all the professions but maybe just one more example if you're in medicine right the temptation frequently is because it's a social service work it's good work and you could do so much tangible good for people's lives there's a huge temptation to idolize it right just like pastoral ministry to idolize the work and say that this is what defines me this is who I am and to give all of your life dedicated to that so that you're basically worked run down to the

ground right and when you are serving so you know working so hard and serving so well and people are not responsive which often happens in the medical profession and in pastoral ministry when people are not grateful for the service you're providing when people are actually rude towards you right then people in the medical profession can become really cynical right because their pride is hurt in that and they I don't deserve any of this why are you treating me this way all I'm doing is providing this good and service for you and only when you have the gospel the fact that Christ is the one that redeems us and saves us from sin and that the sin is at the root of all of these interactions with people and also the gospel grounds our identity so remember that we're not first and foremost a doctor or a nurse or a pastor but that I'm first and foremost a Christian that I belong to God then we can have a proper perspective on work have a proper life work balance and provide holistic care for people and you can suffer for doing good in the workplace in that way as well right and we know

I mean the spirit the soul and body are intricately related right and often things like stress anxiety or false beliefs are related to how people become ill like physically as well and so in order to provide holistic care then you might be more emotionally invested in your clients or patients and that could lead to professional consequences as well right when they want you to keep a clinical distance so that you can be more efficient you're caring you're investing in people pouring into people but when you suffer in this way this is a gracious thing he says when mindful of God one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly so these are just few sketches and I hope that you wrestle with the idea what does it look like as a Christian to do good while suffering at my workplace because God says serve him God calls to serve him in the workplace by suffering while doing good and this is a high call we recognize this how can we possibly do that and we have exactly a blueprint for that in verses 21 to 25 because what enables us to suffer while doing good is the fact that

Christ suffered for us look at verse 21 it 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 and the word example is a really cool word actually that is used if you guys have seen kind of a pattern of the alphabet that you kind of put on paper put over paper and then you trace that's how kids first learn to write the alphabet you guys know what I'm talking about so it's a word that's used to refer to something like that so it's actually a much stronger word than simply an example oh Christ is one of your examples no Christ is the blueprint he's the paradigm by which we ought to live as believers in the workplace and to do good while suffering and in order to demonstrate that he goes to quote Isaiah 53 he uses the language of Isaiah 53 but follows the narrative order in Mark's gospel of Jesus' suffering so he notes let me just read verse 22 to 23 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 and we see this in the passion narrative in the gospel of Mark in Mark 14 65 it says some began to spit on Christ and to cover his face and to strike him saying to him prophesy and the guards received him with blows chapter 15 18 to 19 it says the soldiers salute him in mockery hail king of the Jews and they were striking him in his head and with a reed and a spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him in mockery of Christ but Jesus does not revile in return or answer back or threaten instead it says in Mark 14 61 he remained silent and made no answer if anyone could have made an answer he could have he was the son of God he was the king he committed no sin every single human being that's ever lived had committed sin they deserved some blame there was some deceit in them but in Christ there was no sin there was no deceit found in his mouth but he didn't answer and why?

because it says he was entrusting himself to him who judges justly if you kind of think for a moment about this we have a as human beings we have a very deeply ingrained habit of speaking up for ourselves don't we?

when we're criticized when we're slighted we are our best advocates we speak up for ourselves we defend ourselves because we have learned from experience from living in this world that if we don't no one else will that if we don't assert ourselves if we don't advocate for ourselves if we don't defend for ourselves that we will become victims of injustice because that's the kind of world we live in but in God's economy in light of God's ultimate justice he says Peter says we don't have to defend ourselves because God's justice is perfect and he is supremely worthy of our trust we can entrust ourselves to him who judges justly and there's one more perhaps even more important reason that Christ doesn't speak when reviled verse 24 look at it with me tells us

[30 : 19] Christ himself Christ 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 fact that Jesus bore our sins in

his body on the tree is a reference to Deuteronomy 21 23 which says that those who are hung on a tree are cursed by God so Jesus died on a tree he was crucified on a cross because he was bearing the curse that we deserved he was cursed on our behalf so that we could bear his blessing Jesus bore our sins in his body it says so that we might bear his righteousness the perfectly righteous life that he lived it says Jesus bore our wounds so that we might be healed it says in this passage in order to return us the straying sheep back to God to return us to him he became the slaughtered sheep and he died on the cross and if you guys

I don't know if you guys know this but the cross was a punishment that Romans never had to experience because they reserved that punishment only for slaves and for people who were not Roman citizens so Christ our king died the death of a slave he was the ultimate suffering servant so we can now have the blueprint to be suffering witnesses so we can now be the slaves of God and if you're not a believer with us today or if you're just hearing this message online I want to ask you and invite you entrust yourself to this God who judges justly because the only way we could follow in the footsteps and to do truly do good in our workplace in all that we do only way we can have the spiritual resources to endure unjust suffering while doing good is when we follow in the footsteps of this

Christ is when we are indwelt by the spirit of this Christ and we have the Christ who indwelt through the spirit living through us and in us and every believer I want to exhort you as I've been doing throughout this sermon serve God in your workplace by suffering while doing good just as Christ suffered for us and I can assure you that as you do that tells us verse 25 the shepherd and overseer of your souls will be with you every step of the way he will not leave you to suffer alone with that truth as you were thinking about that and reflecting on that deal meetings so as you were all .

for the part of the experience is cutting like 20 as you kind of say about in or little text to your body or point to