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1 Peter 2:18-25

Ninth Message

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A SLAVERY THAT REDEEMS

SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND

In our study today the apostle Peter will answer a question that many of us have difficulty with: How should we relate to unreasonable people?

As a new convert in my freshman year at Stanford University, I wanted to be God's spokesman and be used by him to help lead the campus to Jesus Christ. But I got a rude awakening in an English class that I was assigned to for three quarters. On the first day of class, my professor attacked Christianity and Christians. I made the mistake of naively raising my hand to counter his attack, and from that day forth he did not spare me and my beliefs. I was faced with an unreasonable situation that I had to endure for months. How would I cope with this person?

As Peter develops his theme of how Christians should live as aliens and pilgrims in a hostile world, he now shows us how to relate to unreasonable people, using as his example Christian slaves in the first century and how they should respond to unjust masters. In the Roman Empire, slaves had few if any rights. Thousands were forced into slavery as the Roman armies conquered new territories and expanded the boundaries of the Empire. The historian Josephus tells us that 10,000 people in the Jewish War alone became slaves. They were sold as cheaply as horses, and treated as property. Even the noble philosophers of Rome thought that slavery was natural, and so ingrained in Roman society that it would be impossible to live without it.

Imagine the slave's response to Christ's message of redemption! "Redeemed" was a common term used in the slave market. How they must have gloried in the message that the Son of God had shed his blood to set them free! As they entered into that freedom they joined a new society where there was neither master nor slave. Evidence found in the catacombs of Rome testifies that there was no class distinction in Christian worship; all were brothers and sisters in Christ. But most slaves still had unrighteous masters. How could slaves have influence when they had no freedom, no rights, and no status?

Peter offers them a radical solution. Their status, says the apostle, far from being dishonorable, is the very role the Messianic King took on in order to redeem the world. Jesus, the King of Kings, did not wear his royal garments, but rather assumed the role of a bondservant so as to accomplish his earthly task. In this text, Peter sets out how slaves too can bring redemption to others, despite their lowly circumstances.

This is a radical word in our day and age. Many people will not be able to receive it. Those of you who can, however, will enter into a transcendent life that will liberate you from your difficult circumstances.

I will begin by reading the complete text. 1 Peter 2:18-25:

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 bore our sins in His body on the cross, 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. (NASB)

I. The Call To Submission (2:18)

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.

A. Knowing Who You Are: A "House-Slave"

Peter begins by issuing slaves a call to submission (verse 18). He addresses them with a title used rarely in the New Testament, a word that I would translate "house-slave." In the ancient world, this word was used of any member of the household, whether wife, child or slave. By implication, Peter says they have responsibility as members of a household to cultivate life within the home rather than damage it by an unsubmitive spirit.

B. Knowing whom you serve

Peter then says, "Know who you are, and also know whom you serve. Submit to your masters, fearing the Lord. The Lord is behind the master; serve the master as if he were Jesus Christ." This is how we should behave in the work place, where irresponsibility is common, or in the private arena, where no one can see our behavior. When we go to public restrooms, for example, we usually find them a mess. As a Christians we should have the attitude that the next person who will use the facilities will be Jesus. That is how a slave is to do his work, fearing the Lord.

C. Without condition

Peter then says that the slave should submit without condition, not only to people who are good and gentle, but also to unreasonable people. Some of these slaves had reasonable masters, just as some of us have employers who are tolerant, gentle and equitable. Charles Biggs says, "Law is the hard and fast rule which equity modifies according to circumstances." It is a blessing to have an employer who is tolerant and wise in his implementation of the rules. If he is flexible, he will adjust the rules to fit circumstance.

By contrast, Peter says that some people are “unreasonable.” They are intolerant and unapproachable, but slaves must still submit. The Greek word for “unreasonable” is the word from which we get the English word “scoliosis.” They are bent, perverted, and unjust. Here is what an Egyptian slave owner wrote concerning his runaway slave: “I commission you by this writ to go to the famous city of Alexandria and search for my slave about 35 years of age, whom you know. When you have found him, you shall place him in custody, with authority to shut him up and whip him, and to lay a complaint before the proper authorities against any persons who have harbored him, with the demand for satisfaction.” How different from what the apostle Paul wrote about Philemon’s runaway slave, Onesimus! He converted him, sent him back to his master, and rebuked his master for his unreasonableness.

Thus, the first century slave (and the twentieth century worker) must take seriously the call to submission in the work place. Christians have an extremely important part to play in a household (or a business), and have an obligation to serve the Lord. And we must submit without prior conditions.

II. The Reasons for Submission (2:19-21)

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.

A. For what it does to God: “This Finds Favor With God”

Peter asks slaves what credit is due them when a master (or, in our case, an employer), punishes them for doing wrong and they endure it graciously. There is no credit due. But when we do what is right, and suffer for it, and endure graciously as unto the Lord, this finds favor with God! This expression “This finds favor with God” comes from the Old Testament idea of the favor or goodwill felt by God to man or man to man.

**Do not let kindness and truth leave you;
Bind them around your neck,
Write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favor and good repute
In the sight of God and man. (Prov 3:3-4)**

The point is, our lives as Christians should be lived on a higher plane than those around us. When we do this by appropriating God’s life, it produces something in us that inspires his favor. How amazing, to think that our righteous responses can bring delight and praise from the heart of God!

God wants us in our difficult circumstances to make his transcendent life visible to the world around us. Jesus said, “What credit is it to you if you love people who love you?” There is no credit due, and no transcendence apparent, in that. When we do right and someone wrongs us in return, however, their sin is made manifest “in living color,” as it were. When we continue with a good response, the redemptive life of God sits side-by-side with the evil response. One reason God allows unjust suffering is to enable people to see their own corruption in contrast to the redemptive love of Christ. In the gospels, our Lord’s consistent forgiveness toward his disciples made them aware of their own depravity, so much so that at one point Peter cried, “Depart from me, for I am a wicked man.”

When our first child was born in 1975, my wife and I prayed that the Lord would use our children to lead our parents to Christ. When our son died a few days later, I wondered if this would result in their salvation. That was 15 years ago, but our parents never responded to God’s call. When we lost our daughter a year later, Elaine Stedman’s words were to us, “God must really love you.” Then I realized that our motives for responding graciously must not be directed toward getting other people to respond to the Lord. It is enough that the transcendent God takes pleasure in us and we are able to share his life.

We miss this step if our responses are contingent on getting an unreasonable person to respond positively toward us. If we are guilty of this, then we become slaves to circumstances and people, and we will not enter into this transcendent life. Peter says it is enough that God loves and delights in us; we must obey because it is right, regardless how others respond. Otherwise, we will not enjoy God’s love and his transcendent life in a difficult situation.

B. For it is your calling

Secondly, says Peter (verse 21), “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.” Why should we submit to suffering? Because when we decided to follow Christ, that became our calling. We must understand that the cross is not extraordinary, it is the norm. We too have been called to suffer for doing what is right, in order to bring redemption to the world.

The word “example” means model, or pattern. In classical Greek it was used of the “outline” of a sketch which the artist filled in with detail. Other ancient writers use it for a “copyhead” in a child’s exercise book. This was a perfect piece of writing which the child was to imitate as exactly as he could. In this sense Christ is the “pattern” which we are to reproduce in every stroke of every letter, until our writing is a facsimile of the Master’s.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” He was faithful to that word. In 1939, when trouble was brewing in Nazi Germany, he was working in New York as a theologian and lecturer. Friends encouraged him to stay, saying that his gift of scholarship could be used to unite the church, but Bonhoeffer would have none of it. “It is not my calling,” he said. “I am called to go home.” He went home to the confessing church and joined in the resistance against Nazism.

It was in prison following his arrest in 1943 that Bonhoeffer’s greatest work was accomplished. There he wrote all the material for his *Letters and Papers From Prison*, and his great work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. During this time the guards were friendly to this strong pastor and secretly took him to the cells of despairing prisoners to minister to them. They preserved his papers, essays, and poems and even established a complete courier service to his family and friends outside. One English Army officer wrote of him:

Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least incident and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive...He was one of the very few persons I have ever met for whom God was real and always near...On Sunday, April 8, 1945, Pastor Bonhoeffer conducted a little service of worship and spoke to us in a way that went to the heart of all of us. He had hardly ended his last prayer when the door opened and two civilians entered. They said, “Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us.” That had only one meaning for all prisoners—the gallows. We said good-by to him. He took me aside: “This is the end,

but for me it is the beginning of life.” The next day he was hanged in Flossenburg... The text on which he spoke that last day was “By His stripes we are healed.”

Why should Christians submit? First, for what it does to God; and secondly, because it is our calling to follow Christ. To help us understand, Peter illustrates by reminding slaves of the beautiful example of Jesus.

III. The Example of Submission: Christ (2:22-23)

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.

A. Christ an example of doing good and suffering for it

Slaves, says Peter, should not try to escape their captivity because they were in the best position—the very position that Jesus himself took. Isaiah 53:9 says,

**His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.**

This quote is a poetic way of expressing perfection. One phrase speaks of external acts (“Who committed no sin”); the other speaks of the heart (“nor was any deceit found in His mouth”). In Hebrew, one combines opposites to express the totality of something. The point is that Christ, though perfect, suffered at the hands of evil men.

B. Christ an example of enduring suffering

During his trial, Christ did not come to his own defense. He was reviled, but he did not revile in return, nor did he utter any threats. I believe his severest pain was not physical, but emotional. Verbal abuse can be far more painful than physical abuse. He endured blows to the back, his beard being pulled, and being spat upon, yet the cruel words uttered against him that mocked his identity as the Christ must have grieved his heart. His accusers questioned everything he had said and done, but he allowed himself to be misunderstood. He had presented himself to Israel as their Messianic King, saying, “Everything I do is from the Father. I speak his words; I do his deeds,” yet they mocked him. They gave him a reed, crowned him with thorns, put a purple robe about his shoulders and heaped scorn on his claims. Being misunderstood is painful, isn’t it? But Jesus said nothing in reply. And neither should we when we are unjustly treated. Augustine said, “Heal me of this lust of mine, of always vindicating myself.”

Jesus refused to speak at his trial because it was a kangaroo court. Although the deck was stacked against him he looked beyond the mockery of the earthly trial to the heavenly trial that would be enacted a few days later. He saved his testimony for that time and refused to defend himself before the chief priests. Likewise, we should never justify our behavior, because this life is not the court. One day we will stand before the Judge of all things and all the evidence will be revealed.

Jesus knew that his Heavenly Father would eventually vindicate him. And at the cross that vindication began. The moment Jesus died the Father allowed no unholy hand to touch his Son’s body; only those hands that loved him were allowed to handle him. Jesus was not placed in a pauper’s grave, but was buried in the virgin tomb

of a rich man. That was the Father’s way of saying, “This is my Son. Keep your hands off of him.” God ultimately exalted him in the resurrection, and placed him in the seat of power. He is the Lord! Despite his silence at his trial he was vindicated at last.

There is an interesting twist in the story of my English professor. At the end of the English course he asked the students to write a paper on our philosophy of life. Based on my study of Francis Shaeffer’s work, I presented a paper on Christianity as a philosophy of life. I was surprised to see that he gave me an A-. He said it was a good, thoughtful, methodical paper. Most of all, he said, I had managed not to preach. He wrote, “But for me, life has no meaning, no order. It is filled with random chance. I may be hopelessly lost. Have a nice summer.” When I worked on campus after graduation, I met him occasionally. It was apparent that he was still hopelessly lost. One day, however, he said to me, “It wasn’t what you said about Christianity that made me think, it was your life.”

We ought to be keenly instructed by the example of Jesus who did what was right and suffered for it. He did not come to his own defense, but allowed the Creator-Judge to defend him, knowing that his vindication would come in the resurrection.

IV. The Value of Christ’s Submission (2:24-25)

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, 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.

A. Sin was abolished on the cross

Christ did what was right. He suffered for it, and he patiently endured it so that he might intercede for the transgressors. He bought our redemption by abolishing sin on the cross. The Old Testament book of Leviticus uses this terminology when it talks of the priest bearing the sacrifice to the altar. But in the New Testament, the cross replaces the altar. Now Christ carries the sacrifice, but he carries it to the cross instead of the altar. Thus, he not only fulfills the role of the priesthood, he also fulfills the role of the sacrifice. Consequently, the power of sin has been broken, righteousness is attainable, and slaves can enter into transcendent freedom.

Through Christ’s perfect sacrifice, God’s Spirit now writes his law on our hearts so that we have a heart that responds to him. Nothing can keep us from this freedom except ourselves. We cannot blame any unreasonable person with whom we live or work, nor can we blame our circumstances, because no person or circumstance can rob us of eternal life. No one can rob us of eternal, transcendent life but ourselves. This freedom is born in oppressive circumstances, and it transforms people as they suffer.

B. We were healed

Peter tells the slaves, “You were straying like sheep, you were naive and aimless, but you came to the cross and found a Shepherd for your soul. You were made whole. Will you now do for somebody else what Christ did for you?” We too must respond to Peter’s question. Will we now fill up the afflictions that are lacking in the body of Christ and be wounded for somebody else?

Church history tells us that these slaves took these words to heart, and they became the most effective witnesses in the Roman Empire. They realized that indeed God had placed them in a strategic location—as slaves they were the very ones who tutored the wives and

children of their masters. These slaves were effectively doing their work as schoolteachers!

There is a fascinating story written about one family, the household of Narcissus. Narcissus was the private secretary to Emperor Claudius. He had tremendous wealth and power, and a very large family. His whole estate

passed into the hands of Nero when, after the murder of Claudius in A.D. 54, Narcissus was driven to suicide at the instigation of Agrippina. It was apparently some of this household who were among the Christian recipients of the Epistle to the Romans...it was largely through their agency that the aristocratic families were eventually reached with the gospel.¹

One of those converts was Acilius Glabrio who as consul with Trajan in A.D. 91 was charged with having atheistic and Jewish ways, a revolutionary [a common accusation against Christians]. He was forced to fight with a lion by Emperor Domitian. Glabrio killed the lion, was released, but wisely went into voluntary exile. Still the Emperor had him executed. He was buried in a family vault which later became one of the famous Christian catacombs.²

How did these heads of state come to Christ? It was through slaves who had submitted to beatings, but who lovingly shared the gospel with the Roman households.

Now think about that unreasonable person in your life and do two things. First, glory in your role as a slave and servant. Stop trying to become upwardly mobile, isolating yourself from ministry, and instead become a servant where you can have influence.

Isaac Watts wrote,

Thus it fared with our Lord Jesus Christ Himself in the days of his flesh. For the most part He lived unknown among men; he did not cry, nor make his voice to be heard in the streets...Let us imitate our blessed Lord, and copy after so divine a pattern. Let our works bear a bright and growing witness to our inward and real Christianity...It is a more sublime glory for a prince to be found among the common poor in undistinguished raiment, and by his superior conduct and shining virtues force the world to confess that he is the son of a king, than to walk through the rabble with ensigns of royalty and demand honor from them by the mere blaze of his ornaments.³

Secondly, out of appreciation for what God has sacrificed, won't you willingly suffer for someone else? Take to heart the words of George MacDonald,

make me into a rock which swallowed up the waves of wrong in its great caverns, and never threw them back to swell the commotion of the angry sea whence they came. Ah, what it would be actually to annihilate wrong in this way!—to be able to say, it shall not be wrong against me, so utterly do I forgive it!⁴

By implication, the apostle is saying that us as aliens we must not only suffer, but by responding to it rightly as Christ did, our suffering will have redemptive value in a hostile world. Although we cannot add anything to Christ's work, since his atonement is perfect and complete, Paul says that he did his part through suffering in "filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24). Through our suffering the life of Christ in us is released into the hostile world.

It is the means by which the world is won to the Father. Viewed this way, what a privilege it is to suffer for his name's sake!

PILGRIM SONG

Charles Wesley

Who still your bodies feel;
Awhile forget your griefs and fears,
And look beyond this vale of tears
To that celestial hill.

Beyond the bounds of time and space
Look forward to that heavenly place,
The saints' secure abode;
On faith's strong eagle pinions rise,
And force your passage to the skies,
And scale the mount of God.

Who suffer with our Master here,
We shall before his face appear,
And by his side sit down;
To patient faith the prize is sure,
And all that to the end endures
The cross, shall wear the crown.

Thrice blessed bliss-inspiring hope!
It lifts the fainting spirits up,
It brings to life the dead;
Our conflicts here shall soon be past,
And you and I ascend at last
Triumphant with our Head.

That great mysterious Deity
We soon with open face shall see;
The beatific sight
Shall fill heaven's sounding courts with praise,
And wide diffuse the golden blaze
Of everlasting light.

1. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 212. This is an excellent treatment of evangelistic methods and strategies in the early church.

2. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 212-213.

3. Isaac Watts, "Meditations: The Saints Unknown in this World," in David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 64.

4. George MacDonald, *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*.