

Women's Bible Study of I & 2 Peter

Lesson 9 / I Peter 2:18-25/ Notes

God Honoring Submission in the Workplace

In a culture that seems to value “rights” and “equality” above all else, mere talk of submission and authority tends to stir up controversy. Words such as humility, sacrifice, duty, and privilege seem to have gone by the wayside, in favor of more politically correct terminology associated with personal entitlement. In the setting of the workplace, these buzz words often come to life in the form of strikes, walk outs, protests, and lawsuits, and yet also in many other subtle behaviors and attitudes grounded in discontentment and a self-focus. Believers are not immune to these temptations, for as we learned in last week's lesson, man's natural inclination is to resist authority, and seek to be autonomous. And yet, God in his grace, has rescued us from this way of living, and granted us true freedom in Christ. This freedom is one that not only releases us from the penalty of our sins, but also grants us the power to overcome sin by submitting to God. For this to occur, though, it is imperative that believers become grounded in the Truth, because without a renewed mind, behavior will continue to be defined by the shifting ideas of man, and the deceitful desires of the flesh.

In our passage for today, Peter goes deeper into the concept of biblical submission and makes clear that believers are not to be focused on securing their rights, but rather on their heart attitude of obedience to God and respect for their masters. He makes clear that where submission to authority is an issue, the mind is not set on God. The concepts he introduces would be considered radical and insensitive to most people, quite ludicrous to the world, even to many Christians. Wouldn't God want us to stand up against unjust treatment and resist ungodly rule? Wouldn't he desire that we be treated fairly at all times? How could a good God call his people to a life of suffering? These questions and many more are addressed in our passage; and most importantly, the motivation to live with God honoring submission is defined. The issue of the heart's affections is raised again, as the preciousness of Christ and his life of sacrifice is put forth as our pattern. As we consider the truths set forth, it is vital to keep this in mind: ***God honoring***

submission is only possible through Christ, and its end goal is to bear witness to the Gospel and thereby evangelize a lost world.

Background and Setting

As we now understand, I Peter was written to suffering Christians who were living in a hostile culture. One aspect we may not understand, though, is that many, if not most of these believers would have been slaves. John MacArthur states, “It is safe to say that as the gospel spread throughout the Greco-Roman world most of the converts were slaves.” This reality is further supported by the fact that the entire work force of the Roman Empire was made up of slaves, and much of the New Testament addresses issues that arose within the church because of slavery. Paul, giving testimony to the background of men and women in the church at Corinth says, *“For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble: But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised things of the world.”* I Cor. 1:26-28

The conditions in which believing slaves found themselves varied widely. Some masters were cruel and unreasonable and would have believed their servants were little more than “living tools,” as Aristotle claimed. Other masters would have treated their slaves as family, trusting them as vital members of their household. This was more often the case than not. The duties of these slaves could also vary widely. Slaves could be highly educated and serve their masters in skilled positions such as accountants, managers, nurses, artisans, tutors, and doctors. In these situations, slaves tended to fare better in terms of quality of life, and were more likely to have the opportunity to purchase their freedom. This was because they were often contracted to work for a set amount of time, or paid more generously for their services. Yet, most of the time securing freedom still required a great deal of discipline, and even if freedom was obtained, hardships could actually increase as the freedman would then have to provide for himself outside the provision of a master. Nevertheless, it did happen. On the contrary, unskilled or uneducated slaves often were subject to brutal living conditions as

they worked: for example, on farms, in mines, as gladiators, or even in the temple; and in these cases their masters had more absolute control over them. The opportunity for their social and economic advancement was greatly limited, and their freedom as well. Additionally, while there was Roman legislation that somewhat regulated the treatment of slaves, the fact that they were legally viewed as property meant that their progress in legal status, financial independence, and social standing was minimal. They basically had no legal rights themselves, and were completely at the mercy of their masters or others in higher social and economic classes than themselves, because they were viewed as property.

Many questions are raised in the modern mind when slavery is mentioned, as most of us typically think of the dehumanizing North American slave trade of the seventeenth century, and the abuses that came with the practice. To be clear, the Bible does teach that trafficking of human beings is sin (Ex. 20:15, I Tim. 1:10; Rev. 18:11-13), and that in situations where it is possible for a slave to gain freedom, the opportunity can be taken. (I Cor. 7:21) The Bible also condemns the oppression of slaves (Ex. 21:26-27, Deut. 23:15, Lev. 25:39) , and in the Old Testament we even see that God instituted a seven year release of the slaves, and also the fifty year Jubilee when slaves were freed. But moving to New Testament we see that the focus of the teaching is heavily on living within the calling God has placed you, seeking to maintain a winsome testimony of submission. (I Cor. 7:17-24) Furthermore, from a spiritual perspective, in the passages where slavery is addressed, it is clear that the only way this godly attitude can be maintained is to recognize that one's true freedom is found in Christ. As I Cor. 7:22 states, *"For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman."* In other words, "In the ways that truly count, no man is freer than a Christian. No bondage is as terrible as that of sin, from which Christ frees the believer." (Macarthur)

Lastly, in considering the context and background of our passage, it is vital to understand that these truths, while directly addressed to servants in Roman times, have significant application for modern employee/ employer work relationships as well. Going back to Genesis, we see that from the fall onward, God designed the servant master relationship to benefit society as a whole, by

using it to draw out the rich resources of the planet, and ensure the care and productivity of human beings. Ultimately, the servant master relationship is meant to enrich mankind, through the sovereignty of God working through a wide range of work situations. It is man who corrupts this sacred provision of God, and yet it is God who allows each and every situation and works through it to bring glory to Himself.

Specifics:

The duties of God honoring submission

Submission with respect regardless of the master's character

Peter urges servants to willingly submit to their masters with respect, that is, with an attitude free of negativity and bitterness. “The Greek work for respect used is *phobos*, which is commonly translated fear in the New Testament, but when used of relationship to human authorities does not seem quite as strong as ‘fear of punishment or harm,’ but rather ‘a healthy desire to avoid their displeasure.’ ” (Grudem) The respect that is to be given is to be full of gracious honor, and is a way to show one’s ultimate respect for God , regardless of the character of the human master. The submission offered is to be given to both “good and gentle” masters and “to those who are unreasonable.” While it would seem easy to submit to masters who are good and kind, it is important to note that even this is not automatic for human beings. Man’s desire for personal autonomy is very strong, and oftentimes ungodly motivations rooted in greed, desire for success and recognition, and even comfort, can blind him to the blessing of a good master. Nevertheless, this does not change the biblical mandate to respect, honor, and seek to please human masters, not for personal gain, but for the honor of the Lord.

Going further, Peter notes that some masters will be harsh and unreasonable. This conveys the idea of someone who is overbearing, and even crooked, dishonest, and morally evil. (Acts. 2:40; Phil 2:15) The character of this master is meant to contrast dramatically with the good and gentle master, and one can infer that mistreatment in the area of pay, work conditions, and

expectations would be the norm. While this situation often seems impossible to bear up under, there is a very real sense in which a holy reverence for God is able to guide the servant through the difficulty with wisdom and endurance. Suffering will be required, as was the case with Jacob when he dealt with the deception of his father in law, Laban (Gen. 29- 31), but as the believer learns to depend on Christ, God honoring submission and respect can still be given.

Qualifications

It is very important to note that submission to human institutions is always limited by God. What this primarily means is that the Christian's responsibility to obey is always regulated by God's authority and truth. For example, submission should never be rendered when the command runs contrary to the Word of God and requires the one in subjection to sin. Examples of this would include but are not limited to: the call to share the Gospel and disobeying the command to be dishonest, fraudulent, or immoral. Also, there are certain situations in which a master might make impossible demands of his servant, where the ability to perform a task would be outside of his capability. (Ex. 5:6-18) In this case, the servant would be free to disobey the master, without displeasing God. Additionally, there are other contexts where the biblical obligation to the master is limited, in light of legal contracts or predetermined agreements between the servant and master. In this situation, the servant is not bound to perform duties that fall outside of his defined responsibilities, but great care must be taken on the part of the servant to not use this opportunity as a cloak for sloth. Rather he should conscientiously seek the Lord's will in the situation while maintaining an attitude of respect, even if he must go against the masters wishes. The most important thing is the attitude of the heart, and a willingness to represent the Lord even if it means enduring injustice.

Endurance in suffering while doing the will of God

The carrying out of biblical submission in the workplace often requires a great deal of suffering. There is no way around it. This is because our fleshly desires are strong, and our ability to carry out these mandates will reside in an ongoing attitude of humility and dependence on God, which while rewarding, still

requires dying to self. This death to self, will only come about as the will of God is embraced and valued from the heart, prized as it were above all else. So what is the will of God Peter refers to in this passage? Obviously, it starts with a heart attitude that desires to please God, and the master, but it extends to the idea of being willing to suffer injustice, and even be punished or persecuted for doing what is right in God's eyes. He makes clear that honoring God in this context may sometimes bring anguish, grief, and sorrow, but that trusting in the loving care and presence of the Father will bring comfort and courage. He upholds Christ as the ultimate pattern of endurance in godly suffering, and makes clear that the believer can have full confidence in God that He will ultimately right all wrongs. He is not blind to injustice and in time will deal with it as He sees fit. (Rom. 12:9) This was the attitude that Jesus had in dealing with unfathomable injustice. *"He **kept** entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly."* 1 Peter 2:23b He always had the greater good in mind, and was willing to lay aside his rights. (Phil. 2:6)

The motivations for God honoring submission

At the heart of God honoring submission is a passionate desire to please God, bear witness to the Gospel, and honor the Lord for His life of sacrifice. This is the crux of verses 19-25. The person who endures grief and sorrow while suffering unjustly is clearly noted as the one who receives God's favor. This is not some meritorious favor that can earn salvation, but a powerful outworking of the the Spirit working in a life. It reflects deep heart affection for Christ, and a zeal for others to know the Truth. It should be noted that the passage makes clear that there can be all kinds of sorrows associated with biblical submission. This lines up with James 1:2 which refers to the various trials believers will face, the word various literally meaning "multicolored." Peter was real about the sorrows that accompany the devoted follower of Christ. He had seen and experienced this first hand and knew that there was a cost to following the Lord. Yet even still, he winsomely urges his readers to consider the "Suffering Servant," Jesus Himself, and all he had endured, and to embrace the Savior's life as our pattern. He makes these ideas crystal clear when he says, *"For this is a gracious thing, **when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.**"* As Grudem says, "It is not a stoic self- motivated tenacity which holds out against all opposition, but rather

the opposite, the trusting awareness of God's presence and never failing care, which is the key to righteous suffering. It is the confidence that God will ultimately right all wrongs which enables a Christian to submit to an unjust master without resentment, rebelliousness, self-pity, or despair."

The pattern for God honoring submission

As we have already learned, the ultimate life pattern for the believer is always found in Christ, and in this passage Peter only goes deeper with this Truth. So, what does it actually look like to submit to God with an upright heart? First of all, as was mentioned earlier, there has to be a willingness to suffer while still doing good. He makes clear that Jesus was the perfect embodiment of all this, and shows the ways in which He did this. First of all, *"He committed no sin neither was deceit found in His mouth"* That is, Jesus never had any ill intent and never did anything to harm a person with trickery or falsehood. He always did what was perfectly in keeping with love. Secondly, *"even when He was reviled, He did not revile in return."* This echoes Isaiah 53:7 that says, *"He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before His shearers, so He did not open His mouth."* The reviling that took place meant that the insults thrown at Jesus were abusive, vile, unkind, and repeated. It has the idea of "piling abuse on someone," not just a one-time event. This type of persecution marked Jesus' life and when one considers the righteous character He possessed, and the legitimate responses back He could have issued, His behavior is indeed remarkable. Not only did he not revile back, *"he uttered no threats."* Instead of choosing to retaliate in any way, He chose to trust the Father by accepting His will, even asking His Father to forgive those who abused Him. (Luke 23:34) This required Him to *"keep entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly."* He had to leave all of the injustice at the feet of His Father over and over and over again. He did this because He knew this was the plan God had set out for Him, to accomplish our salvation, and He endured all for our sake, so that by His wounds we might be healed.

The Reason for God Honoring Submission

The pattern of Christ's suffering extends beyond internal motivations and outward behaviors, and ultimately has as its end goal, man's salvation. Vs 24 says *"He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree that we might die to sin and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."* The reason that Christ endured so much was that as the "Good Shepherd" and "Overseers of our souls" He was willing to do all that was required to make atonement for our sins. He knew that *"all we like sheep had gone astray and had turned to our own way,"* and that in order to save us He would have to lay aside his rights and privileges for a time to accomplish salvation. As Phil. 2:8 says, *"He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."* This pattern of sacrificial giving for the sake of men's salvation also extends to us as believers. While God is the only one who can open a heart to salvation, He can use our godly lives to accomplish His will. When unbelievers see believers living out God honoring submission in the workplace and beyond, they are forced to consider the reason behind such honorable behavior. God's intent is that through the godly examples and uncompromising testimonies of Christians, the *"ignorance of foolish people"* is silenced, and people are drawn to our loving and perfect Savior, Jesus.

1. John Macarthur, The Macarthur New Testament Commentary, I Peter 2:18-25
2. Wayne Grudem, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, I Peter
3. Holman Bible Dictionary
4. Will Durant, Caesar and Christ