

Week 12 - The Christian Employee - 1Peter 2:18-23

Scripture Reading: Colossians 3:22-25

Introduction

“Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters.”

“Whatever you do, work heartily.”

How popular do you think those statements would be as motivational posters in most workplaces today?

We hear a lot these days about fairness in the workplace and there are numerous organizations advocating for ever higher hourly wages all in the name of “fairness”

While the Fair Labor Standards Act establishes such things as a minimum wage and overtime there are no laws about what constitutes fair effort on behalf of the employee for those wages

I have shared with you before how I worked for over 30 years in manufacturing before I entered vocational ministry

However, I don’t believe I’ve ever told you that I worked for several years in shops where the employees were members of a labor union and that I served as a union rep

In my tenure as both a union steward and a union committeeman, I saw all manner of unfairness in the workplace both where workers were treated unfairly by the company and vice versa

I dealt with cases where workers were treated overly harshly while others were treated with too much lenience and I saw plenty of cases where a worker did the company wrong in both their efforts and their attitudes

There were guys who everyone knew were pets who could do no wrong no matter how much they slacked off or screwed up and guys who the bosses always seemed to ride no matter how diligently they worked

And there were plenty of guys who believed they were owed their wages simply for showing up - or even for not showing up if they had something better to do on any particular day

Fairness seems to be a floating concept depending on whether we are on the giving or receiving end

In the section of Peter’s letter that we are considering today, Peter deals with the workplace and he focuses his attention on the Christian worker and how the worker should behave even when their boss is unfair

Like last week’s passage that dealt with the Christ-follower’s relationship with governing authorities, this is a tough passage and it teaches us principles that may be hard for us to accept and apply

After all, we have been conditioned to believe that we should stand up for ourselves and our rights and not simply allow people to walk all over us

However, contrary to our instinct to fight back, Peter writes once again the command, “be subject” and he adds the qualifier “with all respect” making it even more foreign to today’s way of thinking

Look with me at verse 18 [1Peter 2:18]:

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.

Stated simply, Peter’s teaching in this passage is that workers are to not only acknowledge and accept the established order at work but also are to show respect to those who are in authority even when being mistreated by them

Of course Peter begins by addressing this section and its commands to “servants” so we might well question if it applies to workers today at all

So we will begin by trying to determine whether the concept of servants in the first century equals employees today

I. Does “servants” = employees?

The word most commonly translated as “servants” in our English version is the Greek *doulos* which is a more strongly servile word than what Peter uses here which is the Greek *oiketes* used more typically to describe a household servant

Both *doulos* and *oiketes* can be rendered as “slave” but, unfortunately, what we know of slavery in the United States in the 19th Century has caused us to have an understanding of slavery that was quite different from that of Peter’s day

For one thing, the slavery of Peter’s day wasn’t race-based and slaves didn’t look, talk, dress, or behave in a distinct way

And slaves weren’t few in number - it’s estimated that there were as many as 60-million slaves in the Roman Empire

In fact, when legislation was suggested that would force slaves to wear a special tunic so they could be recognized in the streets, the idea was rejected because it was feared that the slaves might revolt if they ever recognized their superior numbers

Slaves of Peter’s day were also often well-educated and some of them worked as doctors, teachers, actors, skilled artisans, secretaries, and stewards or managers of their master’s property

We read about that last aspect of being a servant in Matthew 25 where we see a master entrust his property to three of his servants giving each an amount of money equal to from 20 to 100 year’s wages to manage during his absence

Romans slaves could own property, often earned wages, and could expect to be able to purchase their freedom one day and the living conditions for most slaves were better than those of free men because they often lived in their master’s house

Still, even though some people placed themselves into slavery for a time to gain some economic advantage, for most their service was involuntary and they had a lower status, social standing, and opportunity for economic advancement than free men

They were slaves after all and that’s not a small matter to simply brush past

However, we would be wrong to think that the life of a slave in Peter’s day was horrible or that they were always treated with cruelty as many were loved and trusted members of their master’s household

Actually, in Peter’s day slavery was by far the most common employer-employee relationship

And those we read about in the New Testament who worked as day laborers were more like our modern independent contractors who were relatively autonomous and who resisted being told what to do by those who employed them

So, while “employee” doesn’t convey the same lack of freedom of the 1st Century slave, it fits the skill levels and economic realities of the people concerned better than either “slave” or “servant” does to our modern minds

And while we might not see a clear equivalency between a slave of Peter’s day and an employee of our day, applying Peter’s directives to modern employees is quite appropriate

With that established, let’s look at verse 18 and Peter’s command again [**1Peter 2:18**]:

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.

Peter isn’t endorsing or blessing the institution of slavery here

Rather, he is telling slaves who are followers of Jesus Christ how to live within the institution that is pervasive and entrenched in their society

And Peter says that servants or employees should recognize and respect the hierarchy and place themselves under those who have authority over them without regard to the character of their master

Peter goes on to describe some masters as “good and gentle” which means they were kind and benevolent and not unduly harsh with their servants - they were reasonable men

But others he describes as “unjust” or unreasonable and the word he uses is *skolios* which means warped or twisted

By definition those masters were crooked and unreasonable men and we can picture them using their position of power to inflict undeserved punishment, withholding wages, and generally behaving badly toward their servants just because they could get away with it

But Peter's command isn't dependent upon the master's character but the servant's position as a Christ-follower and he says the believing servant must show respect

And it seems Peter expected - or even knew - that those he was writing to were struggling under harsh masters

Because he uses the word "endure" in the next two verses and endurance conveys the idea of long-suffering or patiently putting up with a bad situation for a length of time

Look with me at verses 19-20 [**1Peter 2:19-20**]:

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 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.

The word "for" indicates that Peter is here giving a word of explanation for the command he has just given

And he says that enduring or bearing up and behaving properly regardless of one's circumstance is a "gracious thing" before God - that doing what he commanded pleases God and brings about God's praise and approval

But there are conditions that Peter introduces here that show that not all endurance is of this quality

So, let's look next at the kind of endurance that pleases God

II. Endurance that pleases God

One of the complaints that is often voiced in opposition to this idea of being subject is that it makes it seem that Christ-followers are simply to allow themselves to become doormats

But what Peter reveals here should ease our minds and put that challenge to rest

A. Motivated by our relationship with God

The first thing that Peter says makes our endurance pleasing to God is our motivation - why we are enduring

The phrase in our ESV Bible is "mindful of God" and it indicates that endurance in the workplace isn't motivated by a sense of duty or even really from fear of displeasing those in authority

Peter says that endurance that pleases God is motivated by our relationship with God

The actual Greek word Peter uses here means "conscience" so that the servant's behavior is motivated by the fact that he or she is conscious that God is watching and the desire to have a clean conscience before God

This is a good time to bring up another matter regarding the word "respect" in verse 18

The way the verse is rendered in our ESV Bible it reads as though the servant is to be subject with all respect to their master

But the word behind "respect" is the Greek *phobos* which means "fear" and last week we saw that fear is to be our attitude toward God and not man

So, while there may be wisdom in fearing the displeasure of an employer, I believe that Peter is actually talking about fear of God and saying that because the servant fears God, he or she should be subject to their earthly master

James quoting from Proverbs 3:34 writes in **James 4:6** that "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*"

And grace there is the noun form of the adverb "gracious" we have before us

When we refuse to submit to the authorities God has placed over us, in whatever circumstance, we are, in effect, refusing to submit to God

So, because we are conscious of God, we should strive to keep our consciences clean before him

After all, being conscious of God makes the servant aware that they are actually serving God rather than their employer

I ran across a story that illustrates this as I was studying for this message

The story concerns the late pastor Howard Hendricks who was on a flight that was delayed from taking off

As they sat on the plane, some of the passengers began to get quite impatient and irritated and one particularly obnoxious man began to vent his frustrations on one of the flight attendants

And Dr. Hendricks noticed that, no matter how abusive the man became, she remained courteous and gracious toward him

After they finally got off the ground, Dr. Hendricks called the flight attendant aside and asked her name saying that he wanted to write a letter commending her to her employer

He was surprised when she responded, "Thank you, sir, but I don't work for American Airlines."

She continued, "I work for my Lord, Jesus Christ" and went on to tell him how she sought to represent Christ well on her job

While this story doesn't directly concern an abusive boss, it does show how that flight attendant was mindful of God in her work

Submission to authority that pleases God is submission that is motivated by what God thinks of us and what others think of God

B. In the face of unjust suffering

The second characteristic of endurance that pleases God is that the suffering that leads to it must be unjust

We see Peter emphasize this in two different ways in verses 19 and 20

First, he says the servant endures sorrows while suffering unjustly then he says God approves when you endure suffering for doing good

Patient endurance of a punishment that one has rightly earned isn't especially commendable or praiseworthy

The funny thing is, an employee can be caught red-handed being lazy, dishonest, disrespectful, and the like and still protest like the dickens when they are punished appropriately for their transgression

But there is nothing that is particularly commendable or praiseworthy for patiently enduring a punishment one has earned without complaint - it's what should be expected

It's a completely different matter when one does the right thing and suffers anyway

Peter may have had in mind suffering specifically for the right thing one has done but the words "for it" are not found in the original text

Therefore, it might be more accurate to understand that Peter is making reference to the general situation where one does what is right and still suffers even if not specifically for the right thing that was done

Journalist H.L. Menken is quoted as having said, "Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what stings is justice"

Menken is known for being sarcastically witty and it's easy to see what he means by his quote and a moral person would be chagrined by being punished for doing wrong

But when a person suffers when they know they have always what they know is right, their natural sense of justice and self-protection is aroused and it's only natural to want to seek revenge

Peter mentions specifically being beaten which was a real threat for a servant in his day

However, we need to take a more nuanced view of that and apply it to any form of injustice whether it be actual punishment or even chronic unreasonableness, rudeness, insensitivity, unfairness, tongue lashings, and the like. Injustice can easily lead to hatred of the one in authority and insubordination against them.

And whenever we feel we have been taken advantage of or dumped on or mistreated we can easily become unwilling to serve unless we keep our eyes on the Lord and are mindful of who we actually work for and our workplace testimony. Again, this isn't the grim endurance of the Stoic who simply ignores the pain or the grin-and-bear-it mentality of the Pollyanna.

It's the quiet confidence and peace in the midst of suffering that belongs to the person who is aware of God's love and care for them and is willing to rely on his unerring sense of justice that will prevail along with the knowledge that nothing happens that is outside of the providence and will of God.

In fact, having told his readers what is expected of them in the workplace, Peter now turns his attention to why it is expected as he says that Jesus is our example of endurance.

III. Our example of endurance

Look with me at verses 21-23 [**1Peter 2:21-23**] –

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. 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.

"For to this you have been called" means the Christ follower suffers in such a way not just to give them opportunity to glorify God in the workplace but because God has called us to suffer.

Jesus told his disciples they would have tribulation in this world in John 16:33 and in John 15 he taught them that they would be persecuted as he had been persecuted.

Look with me at **John 15:18-25** -

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.'

God not only called the followers of his Son to salvation and to share in the glory of his Son but also to share in the Son's suffering so we shouldn't be surprised by it.

Our suffering in this world isn't God's Plan B any more than the suffering of his Son was and it's part of the calling of the Christ-follower to endure wrongs committed against them.

And Peter says that Jesus left us an example to follow by his suffering on our behalf.

It's interesting that Peter quotes from Isaiah 53 which we know as the prophecy of the Suffering Servant which is also an accurate description of the events of Jesus' trial and crucifixion - much of which Peter likely didn't personally witness.

But he knows that the suffering that Jesus suffered on our behalf was the suffering of innocence - he committed no sin.

And it was as heinous as it was exemplary.

Think of it, the Creator of the universe was mocked by religious and governmental officials, soldiers, passersby.

He was insulted, stripped, beaten, and crucified yet he endured without complaint or revenge because he was mindful of his Father in heaven and entrusted himself to the Father's justice.

The patience and calm of Jesus in the face of the pinnacle of unjust suffering is our model and we should follow in the footsteps through suffering that he left for us

I don't want to spend a great deal more time on these verses this morning because my plan is to return to them next week and to look at verses 21-25 in more detail as a separate message

Conclusion

Being subject or submitting to others goes against our grain doesn't it?

It's contrary to everything the world teaches us about how to be respectful of ourselves - it just seems counter-intuitive

But much of what God calls us to do as his children is counter-intuitive to the ways of this world

That's why we need to always remember that we aren't of this world - we are sojourners who are dwelling here for a time as we are passing through on our way to our true home

And Peter teaches us in this passage that the best way to respond to wrong in the workplace is to do what is right

Still, we might well wonder if we have to remain forever in a workplace where we are made to suffer unjustly

I believe the short answer to that question is "No" it is permissible to change jobs should we need to do so

After all, in **1 Corinthians 7:21**, Paul writes to "bondservants" that they don't need to remain a slave forever and if they have the opportunity to free themselves they can take it

However, I think we need to temper the inclination to flee with the principles of being mindful of God and being called to suffer as Christ suffered for us

Before bailing out of a bad situation we need to seek God's will and whether he is being best served by our enduring with patience in our present employment

We need to consider whether we might be short-circuiting a work that God is trying to accomplish in our life or the lives of those who witness our demeanor when treated unjustly

We might also wonder whether Jesus' example means that we have to suffer in silence and never advocate for ourselves

Again, I think the answer is a qualified "no"

Just like we saw last week when we looked at the duty of the Christ-follower to government, "be subject" isn't the same thing as "always obey" and there is a time to speak up in the workplace

First, we have to make certain we are seeking to be subject to the authority over us and that we have the proper attitude of submission and aren't simply fighting for what we want

I believe we can have respectful conversations with those who are over us in the workplace in an effort to right wrongs - but we must do so respectfully and with proper deference and a willingness to accept the decision of the authority

We also have the responsibility to stand up for God and if God or God's truth is being slandered or ridiculed we must respectfully and quietly take a stand with the key words being respectfully and quietly

We must remain subject to the authority even while disagreeing with them and we are never permitted to be defiant against those who are over us

The bottom line is this:

Followers of Christ are called by God to suffer as Christ suffered for them and they should subject themselves under the authorities established by God. When doing so results in being treated unfairly in the workplace, the Christ follower must endure it patiently being mindful of God's glory and their testimony and trusting that God will make things right in the end.

Let's pray

Colossians 3:22-25 (page 984)

Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.