

**“THE SERVANT OF THE LORD”**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

As I have thought about this text this week, and especially as I have reflected upon its application in my own life, I am compelled to begin this sermon with the same words that I cited just a few weeks ago from the great British preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. You may recall that I said that Lloyd-Jones was known for frequently beginning his sermons with this statement: “Today, I want to talk to you about the most important thing in the world.” I believe that there is a sense in which we can say that this text conveys the most important thing in the world. Now this may come as a bit of a surprise, especially to citizens of a democratic nation like the United States of America. This text may raise a lot of questions for citizens of this nation, but it probably does not seem to have much in the way of contemporary relevance. After all, the idea of slaves submitting to their masters does not play very well in our country. Furthermore, Americans are not very keen on being subject to others in any sense. The description of Americans by the French statesman Alexis de Tocqueville, which he made when he visited the United States in the 1830’s, still holds true. He observed that Americans “owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man, they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands.”

For Americans, every man is his own master. So, you may wonder, how can a text like this possibly have anything important to say to us?

It has something important to say because the message contained in this passage is at the very heart of the Christian life. Our Lord himself said so, when he told his disciples “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43-45) Peter is saying the same thing in this passage. And even though his words are directed towards those who were slaves in the literal sense, the principle conveyed here applies to all Christians. As a Christian, your fundamental role in all of your relationships should be that of a servant. This holds true both for those in positions of authority and for those who are under their authority. Every Christian, from the greatest to the least, is called to be a servant.

## **II. THE NEW TESTAMENT AND SLAVERY**

Perhaps one of the most disappointing aspects of the NT to the modern reader is the fact that it does not take a more negative stance in its handling of the topic of slavery. The closest that the NT comes to critiquing slavery is Paul’s letter to the slave owner Philemon. But that letter is really about the relationship between one particular slave and one particular master, both of whom were converted to Christianity through Paul’s

ministry. So the letter to Philemon is a far cry from being a call for the abolition of slavery as an institution.

Instead of seeking the abolition of slavery, the NT addresses those Christians who actually live as slaves, instructing them in how to live as faithful followers of Jesus Christ in that context. To the surprise of the modern reader, the NT actually instructs slaves to be subject to their masters, even when their masters treat them unfairly. Of course, the NT also commands Christian masters to treat their slaves with dignity and fairness (see Col. 4:1), but nowhere does it encourage slaves to cast off the yokes of their oppressors. And this really should not be all that surprising to us, especially not when we realize that the political context of the first century Roman Empire was very different than that of a modern nation like America. Certainly, the Bible's teachings about human nature helped lay the foundation for the eventual abolition of slavery in the Western world. However, abolition was not something that the writers of the NT set their sights on. Instead, they focused on how to help Christian slaves live as good disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is not surprising that Peter would address slaves in a letter to first century churches, because slaves were everywhere in the Roman Empire. In some places, the slaves outnumbered the freemen ten to one. The economy of the entire empire was dependent upon the institution of slavery. In all likelihood, most of the people in the churches to which Peter was writing were slaves. Slaves filled a wide variety of roles in the ancient

world. Some were household servants or workers of the land, but others served as teachers, clerks, and even doctors. A great many people in Peter's world were slaves.

This fact may cause us to wonder whether a passage like this has very much relevance for us. After all, there is no slavery in our nation, at least not in any legal form. As we all know, it is against the law for one human being to own another human being. Still, it would be a mistake for us to think that there is nothing like the ancient institution of slavery in our culture. For most of us, there are situations, relationships, and moments when we are made subject to forces that restrict our freedom, and sometimes unjustly so. I imagine that most of us can think of an occasion when a person or institution that had some form power over us treated us in a manner that was unfair. There are many ways in which people can be held in bondage to someone, or something, else. For this reason, this text has something to say to every Christian, regardless of their social standing. And we begin to see how it speaks to us when we consider the three reasons that Peter gives in support of his command for servants to be subject to their masters. Peter shows us that being a Christian invests life with purposes that are radically different than those of non-Christians.

### **III. SERVICE TO GOD**

First, Peter says that Christian servants should be subject to their masters, even unjust masters, because Christian servants are “mindful of God.” This is essentially the same thing that Peter said in the preceding passage about our need to be subject to civil rulers. He is instructing slaves to see their slavery as the context in which they live out the obedience that they owe to God. And for this reason, the service that they render to their masters is really offered up to God.

A Christian is able to live a life of submission and service, even towards people who mistreat him, because his primary concern is not to please himself, or to ensure that his rights are not violated. Rather, a Christian’s primary concern is to please God. If God has revealed that he is served best when his people submit to unjust authorities in a respectful manner, then that is what we should do. We have no right to question the mind of God.

#### **IV. IMITATING CHRIST**

The second reason that Peter gives for why Christians should submit to unjust treatment is because it provides us with an excellent opportunity to imitate our Lord. Peter tells us that we are called to endure sorrows while suffering unjustly because Jesus first suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we might follow in his steps. As we read earlier from Isaiah 53, Jesus did no wrong, yet “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he

opened not his mouth.” Jesus was treated with infinitely more injustice than all of us will experience over the course of our entire lifetimes. And yet he did not protest. He did not assert his rights. He did not complain of being treated unfairly. And it was by suffering that injustice that he secured our redemption. How can we protest when our Lord, who suffered injustice for the sake of our salvation, calls us to endure unfairness, or indignity, or ill treatment for his sake? Far from protesting, we should respond to personal injustices in the same manner as the apostles in the book of Acts, when they rejoiced that they were given the opportunity to suffer for the Lord.

What might it mean for you to suffer unjustly for the sake of the Lord? What kind of injustice might the Lord be calling you to endure for his sake? Well, just ask yourself: Do people ever treat you thoughtlessly? Is anyone ever selfish, or inconsiderate, or unkind, or even cruel, in their dealings with you? Do you ever feel as if you are being used by another person, instead of being treated with the respect that you deserve as a human being? If so, then this passage provides you with your marching orders. “For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.” It is a gracious thing for Christians to endure injustice, because it demonstrates that God’s grace is at work within us. It serves as a mark of our identity, showing that we are the people who follow the Lamb who was silent as he was led to the cross. We are called to follow in his steps, to imitate him, to be conformed to his likeness. Anything in this life

that will further conform us to the likeness of Jesus Christ is something to be embraced as good, even when it means enduring unjust treatment.

## **V. TRUSTING IN THE JUDGMENT OF GOD**

The third reason that Peter gives for why we should endure unjust treatment from others is the fact that we look forward to the judgment of God. This is another way in which we follow in the footsteps of our Lord, as Peter writes in verse 23: “when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” The Christian can surrender himself to difficulty and injustice in this life because he knows that there is going to be a final judgment for all men. On that day, the Lord will call each person to account for every unkind word, every injustice, every indignity, every act of cruelty. The wicked will not get away with their wickedness. Every debt must be paid, either by the One who bore our sins in his body on the tree, or by the sinner himself. It is this reality that enables us to surrender our rights and to let go of the things that we believe we are entitled to in this life. Even when people mistreat us, we take comfort in the fact that we are serving a different Master. By God’s grace, we have returned to the One who is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

This passage may be one of the most important passages in the entire Bible for Christians who live in a culture that is as rights-conscious and self-serving as our culture. What better way for Christians to stand out than to be people who are willing to surrender our rights and endure injustice? What better way of showing that we serve a different Master? What better way to reflect the likeness of Jesus, the one who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many? Listen now, as I conclude with these words from the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man who knew something about enduring injustice for the sake of the gospel:

“This is what we mean when we speak of Christ dwelling in our hearts. His life on earth is not finished yet, for he continues to live in the lives of his followers. Indeed it is wrong to speak of the Christian life: we should speak rather of Christ living in us... We have been transformed into the image of Christ, and are therefore destined to be like him. He is the only ‘pattern’ we must follow. And because he really lives his life in us, we too can ‘walk even as he walked’ ( 1 John 2:6), and ‘do as he has done’ (John 13:15), ‘love as he has loved (Eph. 5:2; John 13:34; 15:12), ‘forgive as he forgave’ (Col. 3:13), ‘have this mind, which was also in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 2:5), and therefore we are able to follow the example he has left us (1 Pet. 2:21), lay down our lives for the brethren as he did (1 John 3:16). It is only because he became like us that we can become like him. It is only because we are identified with him that we can become like him. By being transformed

**Sermon on 1 Peter 2:18-25**  
**OT Reading: Isaiah 53:5-12**

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**Rev. Andy Wilson**

into his image, we are enabled to model our lives on his...The follower of Jesus is the imitator of God. ‘Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children’ (Eph. 5:1).” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 343, 344)