

Hope When Life is Hard...



A VERSE BY VERSE
EXPOSITION OF
THE EPISTLE OF
FIRST PETER

Submission to Worldly Masters 1 Peter 2:18-20 (696)

Chapter 2 verse 11 through Chapter 4 verse 11 is the second major section of 1 Peter. The main concern in this section of the Word of God is that we, as Christians, do the right thing when times are hard; that we behave righteously under trial; that we conduct ourselves according to the will of God at all times and in every circumstance. And according to Peter essential to such righteous behavior is the virtue of humility expressed in a willingness to submit to the authority God has set over us.

Peter says that submission is to mark every relationship. Indeed, the overall tone, the atmosphere of a Christian's life, is to be one of subordination. We learned last Lord's Day that submission is to mark our relationship to the civil authority. In **2:13** we are told, *submit yourselves to every human institution ... to kings and to governors*. In **3:1** we find that we are to submit ourselves in the home. He says, *in the same way, you wives be submissive to your own husbands* (see also **3:5**). In **5:5** Peter speaks to the matter of submission in the church. *You younger men, be subject to your elders*. In our passage for today, **2:18-20**, Peter speaks of the

submission of Christians where we work. *Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect.*

Like many other kids in my generation I grew up watching cartoons on Saturday mornings. Everyone had their favorites. One show that appealed to my particular sense of humor was *Rocky and His Friends*. I remember Rocky the Flying Squirrel, Bullwinkle the Moose, Boris and Natasha, *Aesop's Fables*, *Dudley Do-Right of the Mounties*, and all the rest. Each vignette of the show would have a title and a clever subtitle. Taking my lead from that show I have both a title and subtitle for my sermon this morning – SUBMISSION TO WORLDLY MASTERS or *Tough Times at the Office*.

1 Peter 2:18-20, *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. 19 For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. 20 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.*

Servants, be submissive. It is hard to establish an exact contemporary parallel to the institution of slavery in ancient Rome. “The slaves to whom Peter was referring were household servants. It has been estimated that there were over 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. They were employed in every occupation, ranging from menial manual labor to professionals such as doctors and teachers. These slaves were not usually treated like those who, several hundred years ago, had been captured in Africa and were transported to work in the cotton fields and on the sugar plantations of the Americas. Roman slaves, on

the contrary, were reasonably well looked after. They had a well-defined role to fulfill in society.

“[Nevertheless] they were not free. Some of them lived quite comfortably. They were often paid for their services, and occasionally, towards the end of their lives, some found themselves in a position where they could buy their freedom. However, the fact still remained that, until they were set free or were able to purchase their liberty, they could not do as they wished; they were slaves” (Bentley, *Living for Christ in a Pagan World*, p. 96). And not a few of those slaves were, like you and me, Christians. So even with the benefits, “there is no question slavery was an onerous burden for those who had to bear it” (Achte-meier, p. 195).

It is precisely on account of that fact that the submission of servants to masters is used by God as a model for all Christians. From the slave/master relationship we learn that our lot in life is not always chosen but sometimes assigned; that our lot in life is not always voluntary but sometimes forced upon us; that our lot in this life is not always prosperous but sometimes involves great loss; that our lot in life is not always a source of fulfillment but sometimes a source of deep despair. But at the same time we learn that these dear people were regularly employed as slaves according to God’s providential ordering of their lives and that they were under obligation to live according to God’s will where He had placed them. So we’re talking about our responsibilities as Christians in the vocational sphere of our lives; living as children of God as we engage in the work in which we are regularly employed. *Servants, be submissive.*

Now before we begin our exposition of these three verses in 1 Peter I want you to see something very important. It is the foundation upon which everything else related to our vocational life is built. Who do we really work for? Who is our ultimate superior? We have to go elsewhere in the New Testament to see this most clearly. Turn to **Colossians 3:22-24**.

*Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, **fearing the Lord**. 23 Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as **for the Lord** rather than for men; 24 knowing that **from the Lord** you will receive the reward of the inheritance. **It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.***

Now look up to verse 17 in the same chapter. **Colossians 3:17**, *and whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.* The superiority of Christ encompasses every deed performed and every word spoken. And gratitude, the giving of thanks for God's kindness to us in Jesus, is the motive that prompts and fuels our obedience in every sphere of life.

Given the principle in **Colossians 3:24** – *it is the Lord Christ whom you serve* - the command to us to “subordinate ourselves to our superiors is based not on social convention or political custom but on our obligation to God: the subordination is to be carried out with all reverence for God” (Achtmeier, p. 193). **Verse 18** says, *Servants, be submissive to your masters **with all respect**.*

The word for *respect* here is the same word used for *fear* in **2:17**, *fear God*. So this is referring not to a slave's attitude toward his owner, but to God. This means

that we may freely “carry out those commands of a superior which do not compromise our primary allegiance to God. All other commands – those contrary to the word of God – are apparently to be resisted, even when suffering is the result” (Achte-meier, p. 195). Submission, my friends, is not a function of circumstances. Submission is not a function of how you are treated or of the attitude of those over you. We need to rid ourselves of that kind of thinking. We need to get past this kindergarten idea that obedience is a function of fairness.

And if you don't agree with me then listen to the Spirit of God Himself as He speaks through Peter. *Be submissive ... not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.* Now complying with the demands and wishes of a kind and fair employer is easy. There were such men in Jesus' day. Do you remember the story of Jesus healing the slave of the Roman centurion? **Luke 7:2**, *and a certain centurion's slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die.* It was probably easy to serve that Roman soldier. Peter's concern is our behavior when just the opposite is the case; when our superior is *unreasonable*.

Unreasonable means “crooked” or morally and ethically “perverse.” That Peter describes these masters as crooked suggests not only physical mistreatment but also dishonesty regarding pay, working conditions, expectations, and so forth” (Grudem, p. 126). Superiors may be unreasonable in their demands. They may require you to work excessively long hours. Superiors may be unreasonable in terms of their expectations - unrealistic in terms of the amount of work they expect you to accomplish. Superiors may be unreasonable in their verbal and

physical treatment of those under them. The point is that your submission extends even to this kind of superior.

Now in verse 19 Peter begins his explanation (*for*) for such submission. *For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God, a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.* Now here we discover why it is so important to submit to those in authority over us even when they are *unreasonable*. Such behavior *finds favor with God*. **Verse 20** says the same thing. *But if when you do right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.*

Now there are several observations we can make about the situation Peter has in mind. **First**, the Christian is suffering loss, mistreatment, and hardship that is undeserved. He has done nothing to merit such abuse. **Secondly**, this individual is experiencing all kinds of mental anguish and grief (*sorrows*) on account of such treatment. His heart is heavy with sorrow.

Thirdly, this individual is bearing up under the weight of these sorrows. Again in **verse 20** Peter uses the words “*patiently endure*” to say the same thing. Now what does it mean to *bear up ... to patiently endure*? I think it means simply to keep going. I believe it means to take the next step in the path of obedience. It means that if today has been a day of hardship and struggle then you get out of bed in the morning and live tomorrow by the grace of God and for the glory of God.

William Carey, the great missionary to India, accomplished almost an unbelievable amount of work in the face of daunting obstacles. On March 11, 1812 a fire destroyed all his manuscripts from his translation work, his great

dictionary giving the equivalent of each Sanskrit word in every language in Asia, his grammars, ten versions of the Bible that had been going through the press, hand-cut founts of type, hundreds of reams of paper ... literally years and years of labor went up in smoke. Upon hearing of the disaster Carey's eyes filled with tears. He said, "In one short evening, the labors of years are consumed. How unsearchable are the ways of God!" One biographer said, "With the doggedness which characterized his whole career, he patiently set to work to make his translation all over again" (Mary Drewery, *William Carey*, p. 155). He simply kept going.

Fourthly, this individual is bearing up; he is enduring the sorrows *for the sake of conscience toward God*. This means that our endurance is motivated by an awareness of what God's will is in the situation" (Achte-meier, p. 196). It means that we know what pleases God and set out to do it. Peter is not saying "that it is pleasing to God merely to endure unjust suffering and the accompanying sorrow. Rather, one's endurance is pleasing to God as he is mindful of God, or, more accurately, because he is conscious of God (NIV). It is the awareness of God's presence and trust in His never-failing care, which is the key to righteous suffering. It is the confidence that God will ultimately right all wrongs that enables a Christian to submit to an unjust master without resentment, rebelliousness, self-pity, or despair" (Grudem, p. 126-127). It is this kind of suffering that *finds favor with God*. "God is pleased when His people trust him in the midst of unjust suffering, imitating the example of Christ" (Grudem, p. 126). Such behavior is commendable in the sight of God.

Indeed, Peter continues in **verse 20**: *For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience?* It is wrong to conclude that

suffering or being treated harshly is meritorious, virtuous or heroic in and of itself. If harsh treatment comes to you as the result of wrongdoing then whether you are a Christian or not you are simply getting what is coming to you. It is a function of simple justice. The endurance of justice is of no particular regard to God. Peter says there is no “credit” due the sinner in this instance. In other words, “there is no special approval or honor due to you” (Grudem, p. 127). Your endurance does not make any particular impression upon God. You have not done anything worthy of divine affirmation. You have demonstrated no particularly remarkable character.

Many people, Christian and non-Christian alike, have quietly endured the just punishment for their sinful, unlawful behavior. “Many wrongdoers know that they are getting what they deserve, and bear the punishment without complaint” (Grudem, p. 127). An incredible illustration of this is found in **Luke 23:39-41** at the scene of the crucifixion.

Luke records, *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at [Jesus]: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”* ⁴⁰ *But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”* There is an ocean of difference between the suffering of Jesus and the men hanging on either side of Him. This is exactly the point Peter makes in the second half of verse 20.

But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. Now what does it mean to *do what is right*? The government does not ultimately define right behavior. Your boss does not

ultimately define right behavior. What is right is not ultimately a matter of opinion. What is right is not ultimately determined by what is popular at the time, by what is acceptable to the general public, what is expedient at the moment, or what is cool according to your particular peer group. Doing what is right means to live and act according to the will of God. **1 Peter 4:2**, *so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lust of men, but for the will of God*. In view here is obeying the will of God and paying a price for your obedience. In view here is suffering, enduring pain and hardship at the hands of a superior on account of one's commitment to doing the will of God.

One may be faced with doing what is right according to the law of the state and according to the standards of his superior. For example, a Christian nurse may be expected to assist in an abortion procedure or a Christian accountant may be instructed by his supervisor to "cook the books." The nurse and the accountant may refuse to do either citing the higher law of God and pay a dear price for their unwavering commitment to the will of God. That kind of suffering counts with God.

"[John Bunyan's] ministry coincided with the Stuart Restoration of 1660 which meant that unauthorized preaching was a punishable offense. Arrested in November 1660 for holding [an illegal religious meeting], Bunyan was sentenced in January 1661, initially for three months, to imprisonment in Bedford jail. His continued refusal to assure authorities that he would refrain from preaching if released prolonged his imprisonment until 1672" ... twelve long years (*Christian History*, Vol. V, p. 7).

Now when you obey God and suffer the consequences and endure that suffering with patience God is pleased. Why is God pleased? I want to speak to this under two headings. The first is this. Such patient endurance reveals the glory of God as He is in and to the saints. Now let me translate that. It is the man or woman of extraordinary character and virtue who bears up in the face of undeserved harshness. But these virtues are attributable to the regenerating and sanctifying grace of God. Your patient endurance reveals your love *for* Christ. Your patient endurance reveals your dependence *upon* Christ (**2:23**). Your patient endurance reveals your willingness to identify *with* Christ, your obedience *to* Christ, your willingness to suffer *for* Christ, and your willingness to follow the example *of* Christ (**2:21**). But God is glorified by the fact that these virtues, this willingness, such strength of character are attributable to the regenerating and sanctifying grace of His Spirit in you.

The second is this. Such patient endurance reveals the glory of our sovereign God as He is in and of Himself. Beloved, it is in and through our patient endurance of unjust treatment that the perfections of God are most clearly displayed. In our patient endurance God's sustaining power is displayed for all to see (**II Cor. 12:9-10**). In our patient endurance of injustice the perfect retributive justice of God will be displayed for all to see when Christ is revealed. At that time God will be glorified as the avenger of the saints. In our patient endurance the power of God to preserve the souls of His elect will be displayed for all to see (**1 Peter 1:5**). In our patient endurance of suffering the infinite and tender mercies of God in comforting His children are displayed for all to see (**II Cor. 1:3-4a**). Finally, God displays His saving power and grace in the conversion of those who witness the patient endurance of the saints. I am reminded of that marvelous scene in the Philippian jail. Paul and Silas, having been beaten and

thrown in jail, were singing hymns of praise to God. And when God sent an earthquake it was to these prisoners that the jailer ran crying, *“What must I do to be saved”* (**Acts 16:25, 30**).

Once again we must conclude the ministry of God’s word with **Romans 11:33** and **36**: *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*

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According to Peter essential to righteous behavior is the virtue of _____ expressed in a willingness to _____ to the authority God has set over us.

In our passage for today, **2:18-20**, Peter speaks of the submission of Christians where we _____.

1 Peter 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.*

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Submission is not a function of _____. Submission is not a function of how you are _____ or of the attitude of those over you.

19 *For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.*

Four Observations on verse 19:

The Christian is suffering loss, mistreatment, and hardship that is undeserved.

This individual is experiencing all kinds of mental anguish and grief (*sorrows*) on account of such treatment.

This individual is bearing up under the weight of these sorrows.

Now what does it mean to *bear up ... to patiently endure*?

I think it means simply to _____.

This individual is bearing up; he is enduring the sorrows *for the sake of conscience toward God*.

This means that we _____ what pleases God and we _____ to do it.

20 *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.*

Doing what is right means to live and act according to the _____ of _____.

In view here is obeying the will of God and _____ a _____ for your obedience.

Why is God pleased?

Such patient endurance reveals the glory of God as He is in and to the saints.

Such patient endurance reveals the glory of our sovereign God as He is in and of Himself.