

The Christian and Social Order, Part 2: Enduring While Suffering Unjustly 1 Peter 2:18-25

This text has been interpreted constructively or destructively depending on one's position.

- The *oppressed* may read it through the lens of the Exodus, and see the suffering of Jesus as a subversive blood seed upon the earth that one day springs up into God's justice on their behalf (cf. James 5:1-6).
- The *oppressors* may use the text to keep others in submission, as it was with the New World slaves: "*The good book tells you slaves to submit to your masters, and even says that by so doing, you are following the example of Jesus. So, your suffering is really a means of redemption, even if you die while doing it.*" In the days of chattel slavery, this was preached in the white churches that the slave-owners required their slaves to attend.
- "Various people at various times have been deeply disturbed by the apparent selling out of the gospel in an attempt to live peacefully in a fallen world. Nowhere has this issue been more seriously and severely debated than in the context of the New Testament passages on slavery. How, is it argued, could one like Paul or Peter, who affirm that God has set people free from the effects of sin, have acquiesced to the reprehensible institution of slavery? These are serious questions, and they deserve a serious answer, though any answer will be partial at best."¹

Getting bearings on what Peter intended.²

1. Peter addresses household slaves (2:18).

- Slaves comprised an estimated 25-35% of the empire population. There was a wide spectrum of slave status, from those who worked the mines and fields (Gk. *doulos*) to the professionals who served in the homes (Gk., *oiketas*). "Slaves" in 2:18 is the word for domestic servants (Gk. *oiketai*), i.e., those who lived in the homes of their masters, perhaps even as doctors, musicians, accountants, teachers, secretaries, etc.
- Since they lived in the homes of their masters, Peter used the common method of the moral philosophers, a *household code of conduct*, in 2:18ff. In Greco-Roman society, philosophers taught that the household was the cradle of social order – husband and wife, father and children, master and slave. A man's authority as *pater familias* over his household was considered the backbone of an ordered society. Christianity brought social equality (Gal. 3:28), and thus reinterpreted these roles. The question for these believers was "*How do we practice our freedom and oneness in Christ in a society where domination and divisions are so central to the culture, and where demonstrating our redemption may arouse suspicion and persecution?*" When Peter and Paul wrote their household codes, they were not imposing new social structures, but were addressing structures that already existed and showing how to bring Christ into that structure. Their purpose was not necessarily to preserve the structures, but to demonstrate how to imitate Christ in those structures.
- In the case of slavery, since Christianity taught that "*he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord*" (1 Cor. 7:22), these slaves could have been moved to take advantage of their new status and shirk their duties. So, Peter here encourages a submissive, respectful posture of radical goodness.

¹ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians, Volume 2: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1-2 Peter* (InterVarsity Press, 2007), 146-147.

²Portions from Scot McKnight, "Emerging Peter: Slavery, Parts 2 (<https://goo.gl/7KBQzE>) and 3 (<https://goo.gl/42FPNg>), in the blog, *Jesus Creed*. Accessed 2016-10-28. For an excellent discussion of the ethics of suffering servants, see Ben Witherington III, *New Testament Theology and Ethics, Volume II* (IVP Academic, 2016), 568ff.

- 2. Peter addresses believing slaves who suffer harsh treatment under unbelieving masters (2:18).** He uses the words “harsh” (2:18, Gk., *skolios*), “unjust” (2:19, Gk., *adikos*), and “beaten” (2:20, Gk., *koliphazo*). In this respect, Peter’s *household code* is different than Paul’s in Colossians 3-4 and Ephesians 5-6. Overall, Paul addresses believing husbands/wives, masters/slaves, etc., so there is a greater degree of symmetry and mutuality in his instructions (e.g., “masters...do not threaten your slaves,” Eph. 6:9; “masters...provide your slaves with what is right and fair,” Col. 4:1). Peter, on the other hand, is dealing with religiously mixed households and direct clashes with a pagan society. He addresses Christian slaves but not their unbelieving masters, and Christian Roman citizens but not their unbelieving magistrates, as the unbelievers are assumed to be absent among the recipients. The only hint of mutuality is 1 Peter 3:7 regarding husbands; but otherwise, Peter addresses Christian duties to those outside the Christian community, even if they live in the same household as the unbelievers.
- 3. Peter wants their thoughts to be upon their relationship with God, “mindful of God” (2:19).** In fact, God is the only one to whom these Christians are to offer absolute, unconditional obedience. Peter asks these believers to “reverence” or “fear” God (2:17) but only to honor, respect, or defer (submit) to earthly authorities. Even then, it is “for the Lord’s sake” (2:13).

Where respect for authority and order is possible without compromise of one’s loyalty to God, this respect (“honor” and “subordination”) is appropriate. Where, however, adaptation to societal values and norms endangers exclusive commitment to God, Christ, and the brotherhood and obliterates the distinctive identity and boundaries of the Christian community, Christians are to stand fast and resist the encroachments of society, behind which stands the devil (5:8-9). Keeping open the channels of communication between believers and nonbelievers is not to be confused with...social assimilation, ...[but as] an opportunity for demonstrating the honorable character of Christians and their God and are essential for recruitment to the Christian faith.³

- 4. Peter calls them to “submit” or to “live within the order” (2:18).**
- Remember, this theme began with the topic sentence for this section, “*submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution*” (2:13)
 - Peter does not consider liberation, though this would have been legitimate.
 - Living within the order can take many shapes: We can protest, even get arrested, and we can appeal to politicians and law-makers – all “within the order.”
 - In this case, Peter encourages only one expression: *live within the order by being good*. This is probably because he did not see any other option in their case.
 - He is not sanctioning slavery or abuse but is instructing the socially powerless on how to behave in a way that creates the most effective Christian witness.
 - “To incite Christian slaves – or pagan slaves, for that matter – to revolt would have been to condemn them to certain death, and to increase the hardships and sufferings of those who did not revolt.”⁴
- 5. Peter presents the suffering of Jesus as an example of endurance in unjust suffering (2:21-25).**
- He elevates their horrific experience through their solidarity with Christ as a witness.

³John H. Elliott, *1 Peter, Anchor Bible, volume 37B* (Doubleday, 2000), 510; quoted in Witherington, *New Testament Theology and Ethics*, 580.

⁴S. Scott Bartchy, *First Century Slavery & 1 Corinthians 7:21* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 63-64; quoted in Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, 149.

- “Sometimes the way to follow Jesus is to go to the cross with him. Peter thought this was the only option for the household slaves — he appealed to them to look to God for grace, to look to God for vindication, and to follow the example of Jesus. Sometimes we pursue justice “within the order,” and sometimes we bear with the system and suffer. I don’t think there are any hard and tight rules to show us the way. We live by faith; we discern; and we step out. Sometimes the steps we take are in the steps of Jesus. The steps of Jesus lead to the cross, and for Peter the cross is the central reality of God’s revelation. And we are to look not through the cross but directly at the cross — and not even look beyond it.” (McKnight)

6. Peter describes this endurance as “a gracious (commendable) thing”

- He repeats this at the beginning and end of 2:19-20, which means his emphasis is the “grace” this behavior brings to bear.
- “Peter counsels the powerless slaves to follow Jesus right into the thick of suffering not only because God can be trusted to establish justice, someday and in some way, but because grace creates room for conversion, because forgiveness both undoes injustice and creates an alternative way, because love is nearly irresistible by humans.

So, when Peter is urging the household slaves to endure, he is arguing that the grace of God that is learned in Jesus has a way of changing things — the seeds of suffering are redemptive.

I would not say that Peter’s strategy is always the only strategy. There is a time to resist “within the order” and there is a time to let the system grind away so that God’s grace may become visible.” (McKnight)

What are the implications?

1. Consider how the radical, peaceful goodness of Christ as presented in this text may help us, either as an alternative to activism (especially when we are relatively powerless), or as a code of conduct on how to conduct such activism.
2. While Peter’s instructions are not the only way to interact in the face of injustice in ours or others’ lives, can you think of times that suffering love, endurance, and radical goodness have borne powerful testimony? There is a special strength to this kind of endurance.

Constantine Jefferson: What you doin' hiding out here, girl?

Eugenia 'Skeeter' Phelan: I just couldn't tell mama I didn't get invited to the dance.

Constantine Jefferson: That's all right. Some things we just got to keep to ourselves.

Eugenia 'Skeeter' Phelan: The boys say I'm ugly. Mama was the third runner-up in the Miss South Carolina pageant...

Constantine Jefferson: Now you quit feeling sorry for yourself. Now that's ugly. Ugly is something that grows up from inside you. It's mean and hurtful, like them boys. Now you not one of them, is you? [*Skeeter shakes her head*]

Constantine Jefferson: I didn't think so, honey. Every day you're not dead in the ground, when you wake up in the morning, you're gonna have to make some decisions. Got to ask yourself this question: "Am I gonna believe all them bad things them fools say about me today?" You hear me? "Am I gonna believe all them bad things them fools say about me today? You hear me today?" All right? As for your mama, she didn't pick her life. It picked her. But you, you're gonna do something big with yours. You wait and see.⁵

⁵ From “The Help (2011) Quotes,” <https://goo.gl/S1IEvC>.