

# The Suffering Servant

1 Peter 2:18-25

David H. Roper

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Do you have an unjust boss, one who is harsh, critical, ungrateful -- and yet who has been placed in authority over you? Perhaps it is an athletic coach who rides you unmercifully, or it may be your commanding officer, if you are in the military, or it may be your employer at your place of business. If so, Peter has a word for you today, as he discusses the issue of suffering servants.

Remember that Peter is in the second division of this book. The first has to do with salvation -- our destiny. The second has to do with submission, which is our duty. In the opening chapters he talks of the fact that we are aliens, exiles, who have no permanent residence or rights here. In this next section he delivers, as someone has stated it, a series of "ethics for exiles." The point he underscores time and again is that of submission to authority. He spells out a number of areas within society where that attitude is to be displayed. Whether it is to the state, or in the realm of employer-employee relationships, or within the family, the paramount duty of every believer is submission. Now, that is hard to accept, because it strikes at the fundamental problem of humanity. We are proud. We do not want to bow to anyone and submit to any authority. As William Henley says in his poem "Invictus,"

*Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul!  
In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced, nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody but unbowed.*

This is the attitude of our spirit: "I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul. No one will tell me what to do!" This, of course, is the problem which causes so much heartache in the world, makes life so difficult, strains our relationships with members of our family and people with whom we work. It destroys us internally. We are the ones who suffer the most destruction in body and soul.

This is why Jesus said, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls." The moment we come into a relationship with the Lord, he changes our nature, radically. Then he begins to work out that change in our life.

By submitting to his yoke, i.e., his willingness to submit to authority, we find that life becomes much more restful. We learn from him how to be "meek and lowly in heart," as the King James Version puts it. This does not mean being weak, because meekness is not weakness. No one could ever charge the Lord with weakness, but he was meek. That is, he was non-defensive. He did not insist on his own rights. He did not require everyone to treat him justly. And what God is doing in our life is to bring us into conformity to Jesus Christ. Verses 11 and 12 of chapter 2, as we saw in our last study, constitute the pivot point. Verse 11:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul.

We saw that in the context Peter is referring here to our passions and drives to get our own way, to secure our own rights. Peter says, "Abstain," or "stand off" from these, and in verse 12, "Keep your behavior excellent, or

maintain good behavior" - to let the winsomeness and beauty of the character of Christ be exhibited in our lives. When oppressed, and when unjustly treated, we can be loving and patient and self-controlled. The result will be that people will be drawn to the Lord, and we ourselves will be delivered from these passions which destroy us. As Mammy Yokum says, in *Li'l Abner*, "Goodness is better than badness, 'cause it's nicer." Now, that will not stand up under a whole lot of analysis! But good behavior does make things a lot nicer. That is Peter's point: "Maintain good behavior. Let the winsomeness of Christ be displayed."

Then he begins to spell out various areas of life where that attitude is to be realized. First, with respect to the state, in verses 13 through 17, which we studied last week. Then, as servants, in relation to their masters, verses 18 through the end of the chapter. Peter writes,

**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.**

There is more written in the New Testament to servants than to any other class except the church itself. Far more is written to servants than to kings. This is not merely because the Christian faith had its major impact upon the servant class. That really is not true. The Christian faith spread throughout every class. There were very wealthy people as well as very poor people in the church. The reason so much is said to slaves, and the reason there were so many slaves in the early church, is that there were so many slaves in the Roman Empire. There were some sixty million slaves at the time Peter wrote these words. That is almost a third of the current population of the United States! They had come from all parts of the world as a result of Rome's conquests. They came from all classes many had been governmental figures, doctors, lawyers, teachers -- and now were pressed into heavy service for Roman citizens. The Romans were masters of the world. Why should they work when they had this labor force at their command, and at such little cost?

The slaves' lot was very difficult. They were treated like animals, even branded. Many were kept in filthy barracks and driven each day to the fields. They had no legal rights. Most of them were not allowed to marry. They could only cohabit. Their children belonged to their master. Slaves were cruelly and harshly treated. Their masters had the right of life and death over them. And as you can imagine, they were a very restless and bitter militant group. I read last week of a slave uprising in Sicily in which over fifty thousand slaves rose up against their masters and rampaged across the island, burning, looting, and killing. It took the Roman army several years to subdue them. These were bitter, restless people. Into this stratum of society the gospel came, and the question was raised at the very outset, "How should we, as slaves, now respond to our masters? Should we throw off the yoke of slavery? What should we do?" Peter, Paul, and others wrote to answer this question.

This is Peter's word to them, in verse 18: "Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect." The word he uses here for servants is not the normal term for a bondsman, *doulos*, which occurs throughout the New Testament, but *oiketes* - a domestic, a house-slave, which was the most degrading, galling kind of servitude. It is one thing to work in the fields and have "Massa" come down periodically and lay on the whip; it is another thing to live in the house with the master, and have to draw his bath, scrub his back, rub him down, and do all of the distasteful, degrading things a household servant had to do, and thus be in close physical proximity with his despised Roman master. And yet Peter says, "Be submissive." The word means "take a position under," i.e., obey him to the extent you can, i.e., until his orders conflict with some specific statement of Scripture -- until it is either his law or God's law. You are to submit to him as master, and you are to do so with respect. That is, you are not only to submit outwardly but also inwardly.

Most of us today are not slaves. You may feel as if you are, but you really do not meet the definition of a Roman slave. Yet it is true in a sense that for the forty-plus hours a week your employer buys your time, and you are his slave. And certainly if slaves are to be obedient to their masters, how much more so are employees to be obedient to their employers. Peter says to obey them, to do what they ask you to do, and to do it with respect not to roast them around the water cooler, but outwardly to obey them, and inwardly to show respect and honor. And this not only to the good and gentle, but also to the perverse, to the wicked, to the one who is unjust, who ignores you, who never says, "Thank you," who never appreciates you, who treats you like a stick of furniture around the

office, who blames you for things you never did, who never encourages you in some thankless, mundane task to which he has set you. Perhaps you have a tedious and monotonous job like that of Ogden Nash's "Sir Percival Beer, who spent a very distinguished career, moving pieces of paper about, from a tray marked 'In', to a tray marked 'Out!'" How should you react? Peter says to submit, and to submit to your employer in a spirit of respect -- not only to the good and the gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.

Now, this does not mean we cannot negotiate with an unreasonable employer. We can ask for higher wages; we can ask for better working conditions. We have that right. We have the right to leave their employ if the situation becomes so impossible we cannot stay. In general it is not good to run away from anything that is difficult. I do not think God ever wants us to run from something just because it is hard. He may want us to stay there in order to learn some very valuable lessons. But we can negotiate. We have the freedom to move, or to talk to our employer and try to set things right. But Peter's point is, while this is going on, maintain good conduct. Do not rail against him, do not complain, moan, feel sorry for yourself, get bitter, restless, resentful, talk about him behind his back. Obey him, and do it with a spirit of reverence and honor.

Now, this is not a word to employers. We need to keep this in mind. There is no justification anywhere in Scripture for employers to oppress their employees. There is a great deal of truth throughout Scripture addressed to masters, to employers. And if we ever find ourselves oppressing our work men, we ought to read thoughtfully such passages as James 5, where James tells us that the outcry of those who have been defrauded reaches the ears of the Lord of hosts, and he will act on their behalf. So there is no license here for oppression on the part of masters. There is plenty of Scripture which addresses itself to that problem. This is a word to employees, and it says that no matter what our master does, we are to respect him and to obey him.

Beginning with verse 19, Peter introduces a second thought:

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

Peter says, "If you are suffering, be certain it is not because you are obnoxious, or because you are late, or irresponsible, or unfaithful." We are to be responsible servants in every situation, and to give our masters no cause for blaming us. You see. There is nothing noble about being reprimanded for doing your job poorly. That sort of suffering, Peter says, brings no credit. The sort of suffering which really counts is that which takes place when we have done everything we know to do, when we have gone the second and third and fourth mile, and we still are treated unjustly.

In both verses 19 and 20 Peter says there is favor with God in suffering unjustly. The word translated "favor" is the Greek word for "grace" - *charis*. It speaks of loving acts toward someone who does not deserve them. The gracious thing is to go beyond what is normally expected and to do loving and compassionate things for people who do not deserve it. When you do the very best you can, but are misunderstood and unjustly treated, and you take it patiently, that, Peter says, is grace.

I think the Lord's words must have been ringing in Peter's ears at this point. In the sixth chapter of Luke there is recorded for us a statement Jesus made to the apostles. Jesus said, "And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" (The word translated "credit" is the same word, "grace," that Peter uses.) That is, "What grace is there in that, if you love those who love you? Everyone does that." "And if you do good to those who do good to you, what grace is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what grace is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return Expecting nothing in return -- not praise, not support, not encouragement -- expecting nothing in return -- that is grace." "...and you will be sons of the Most High; for he himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men." If we want to be sons of the Most High, then we have to be kind to the ungrateful, as he is kind to the ungrateful, to the selfish, and to the unjust.

A number of years ago I read a story by Watchman Nee about a Chinese rice farmer. There were a number of fields arranged in terraces up the side of the mountain, and this farmer's was located a good way up. He had to water his rice field by pedaling a bicycle-like device which pumped water from a stream up through an irrigation system to his field. It was quite an exhausting procedure. He had to go down the side of the mountain, get on this contraption, and pedal it rapidly for about an hour in order to flood his rice paddy. To his consternation he discovered that every night when he had finished doing this, his neighbor, whose field was directly below his, would put a hole in the dike and drain the water into his own field. Every morning this poor farmer would repair the break in the dike and pump his field full of water again. And every evening his neighbor would breach the dike and let the water run down into his own field.

This went on for several weeks. The farmer talked to his neighbor, asked him not to do it, did everything he could to persuade him to stop. The man refused. There was nothing the farmer could do to change his mind. So do you know what he did? The next morning he hooked up the pipe to his neighbor's field, pumped his neighbor's rice paddy full of water, and then he pumped his own rice paddy full of water. Now, that is grace! That is being kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Peter says it is truly grace when we do everything we can to please our master, and he still beats us, but we take it patiently and are kind to him. That is grace.

In verse 21 Peter introduces the example of Jesus. It is so good that he does, because we all would respond by saying, "Well, but you don't know the kind of boss I have! That's good in theory, but it would never work in my office with my boss. He is absolutely impossible! No one could live with him." I have not worked in your office, and I do not know how difficult your boss is. But I know One who has experienced more injustice than anyone else who ever lived -- the Lord himself. He is the example. Peter writes, verse 21,

**For you have been called for this purpose** [i.e., you have been called to suffer injustice, and to do so patiently], **since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps . . .**

The word translated "example" is very interesting. It means, literally, "underwriting," and refers to the way writing was taught in Greek and Roman schools. The pedagogue would take a strip of papyrus or a clay tablet and inscribe the letters of the alphabet as perfectly as he could across the top. The student would painstakingly follow the example of the teacher, trying to retrace these letters underneath. That is why it was called "underwriting". Peter says that just as children try to trace the example a pedagogue leaves behind, we are to trace the example of Jesus.

Now Peter takes an interesting approach. He goes back into Isaiah 53 and gathers up a number of statements about the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, and shows how Jesus fulfilled them. It is significant that he would do this because those to whom he was writing were suffering servants, and to refer them back to the Suffering Servant, who has no peer as an example, would be an encouragement to them. Verses 22 through 25:

**. . . who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.**

Jesus never sinned. He never lied, never shaded the truth. He was the only honest man whoever walked on this planet. He not only acted in a sinless way; sin never came out of his mouth. He never exaggerated, never stretched the truth. He was absolutely honest both in life and word. Peter had walked with the Lord for three and a half years. He had seen him in every conceivable circumstance -- in the morning when he was tired from inadequate sleep, in the evening when he was weary from a hard day. He had seen him under pressure, under attack, and when people were indifferent to him. Yet he never heard from the Lord one word of complaint. Jesus never threatened, never tried to justify himself, never lashed out in irritation. He never did any of the things we would expect from a person who was unjustly treated. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten. He did not say, "Just wait until I come again, and then you'll get yours!" He took it.

And the amazing thing is that he was innocent. He was tried, convicted, sentenced, and put to death -- and all of the charges were illegal, trumped up! There was not one they could make stick. Yet he never defended himself, was never resentful. He was, as Isaiah said, "like a lamb led to the slaughter." And Peter says that is the example.

How could he do it? Peter tells us in this passage: ..he kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously He did not try to defend himself; he let God defend him. There is only one Righteous Judge in the world, and that is his heavenly Father. He could entrust himself to the heavenly Father to defend him and to justify him and to set things right. And the Father did. Look at Isaiah 50, beginning with verse 6. This passage referred to Isaiah in his day, and the sort of treatment he received at the hands of God's people. But it also predicts the treatment Jesus was to experience:

**I gave My back to those who strike Me  
And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;  
I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.  
For the Lord God helps Me,  
Therefore, I am not disgraced;  
Therefore, I have set My face like flint,  
And I know that I shall not be ashamed.  
He who vindicates Me is near;  
Who will contend with Me?  
Let us stand up to each other;  
Who has a case against Me?  
Let him draw near to Me.  
Behold, the Lord God helps Me;  
Who is he who condemns Me?  
Behold, they will all wear out like a garment;  
The moth will eat them.  
Who is among you that fears the Lord,  
That obeys the voice of his Servant,  
That walks in darkness and has no light?  
Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.**

How could Jesus endure the shame, the indignity, the disgrace, of being slapped and sworn at, having his beard plucked out, being beaten beyond recognition, and utter not a word? Because, as Isaiah tells us prophetically in this passage, he entrusted himself to the One who judges justly. He let the Lord contend for him. Again, it is not wrong to try to set things right. But we should do so in a spirit of dependence upon God, with a quiet spirit, and with respectful, honorable behavior. That is what Jesus did. That is the example set down before us.

One of my favorite characters in the Old Testament is Moses. The Scriptures say that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth. That is, he was the least self-defensive person in the world at that time. He had led the people out of Egypt and down to Mount Sinai. They had been there for a year. He was terribly burdened with these people, and he was all alone. They complained, moaned, challenged everything he did, and challenged God. Yet he had borne with them. Just about the time they left for the Promised Land, Moses asked the Lord if he would relieve him of some of the burdens. The responsibility was then distributed among twelve other elders. About that time another great outcry arose among the people because they were not being adequately fed. Moses was burdened with many, many such problems.

In Numbers 12 there is an account of his confrontation with Miriam, his sister. Miriam was his oldest sister, the one who had cared for him as an infant when he was cast adrift in the basket. Little sisters who grow up to be big sisters sometimes tend to be a little overbearing, and as they were traveling north toward the Promised Land she came to Moses and said "Moses, you've taken too much on yourself." In other words, "Who do you think you are? What right do you have to think that God has given you authority the rest of us do not have?" The passage tells us, indirectly, that this was not her real problem. She was really a racist. Moses had married an Ethiopian woman. Miriam did not like it, and that was what was underlying her criticism of his leadership. But this is where

she attacked him.

If it were I, I know how I would have responded: "Look, Miriam. I didn't want this job in the first place. I was out there on the desert herding sheep, minding my own business, when God called to me out of the bush and said, 'I want you to deliver my people.' I told him then I didn't want to go, but he made me go. And beside that, for the last year and a half, I've been putting up with this rabble. Nobody is trying to help me, everybody is critical of me..." and on and on I would have gone. But the Bible says that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth. Do you know what he said? Nothing He went to his tent. Moses had a little tent where he met God. He pitched it before they built the sanctuary. He went to his tent and said, "Lord, what do I do?"

The Lord said, "Miriam, would you step over here a moment? I'd like to have a word with you. Do you see my servant Moses? Do you know who he is? With most people I talk in visions and dreams, but with my servant Moses I talk face to face. How dare you sit in judgment on him!" And Miriam was stricken with leprosy.

Now, I am not saying that your boss is going to contract Hansen's disease if you go back and do what is right! God does not always act in those radical ways. But he will defend you. He will justify you. You do not have to defend yourself. Oh, you can take whatever steps are necessary to try to set things right. But underneath is the confidence that God is fighting your battles for you. He will contend for you. And what rest and quietness of spirit that gives! We do not have to be angry, uptight, and wrathful because people are not treating us right. God will fight our battles for us.

Peter goes on to say in verses 24 and 25 that when Christ died, not only was he an example of one who suffered unjustly, but that the cross itself provides the power to deal with our tendency to be self-defensive. Sin, and the flesh, is so strongly entrenched in our life that it can overwhelm us. These passions that war against the soul, which Peter described earlier, can come to the surface so quickly that immediately we fly to our own defense. These are overpowering urges. Philipp Melancthon, Luther's young associate, said, "Old Adam is too strong for young Philipp!" How often we feel that way! We do not have the power to put down these rages which rise in us. But Peter tells us in verse 24 that Jesus "bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness," that we might depart from sin. We can, in the power that the cross, and the life, of Jesus Christ gives us, sit in judgment on these passions, these desires which rage within us. We can turn away from them, and we can receive the life that produces righteousness, which is Jesus Christ himself.

Peter goes on to use this powerful statement of Isaiah's: "...for by His wounds you were healed." The word translated "wounds" is noted in the New American Standard Version margin as "welt" - stripes made by a whip, referring to the scourging Jesus bore. Peter says it is by that scourging we are healed -- not physically, but inwardly. As I was talking this passage over with my wife, Carolyn, this past week, she pointed out that the greatest healing, when we are unjustly treated, must take place within, because we feel so hurt, so put-upon. It is not the outward stripes; it is the inward hurt. And it is knowing Jesus bore those stripes for us in order to set us free, which does set us free from bitterness, and thus we are healed within. Can you imagine a Roman slave going back to his barracks, having received a cruel and vicious beating for something he did not do, muttering under his breath, hurt in his spirit, angry and resentful and bristling, and then remembering these words from Isaiah 53: "...by his welts we are healed"? He could turn away from his bitterness and receive the quietness and grace and compassion of the Lord himself.

Peter reminds us in verse 25 that we were straying like sheep. Again, that comes from Isaiah 53: "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each one of us has turned to his own way..." That is the old way of getting things done - to do it our own way, to do it violently, abruptly, viciously. That is the way we used to do it. Peter says, "You were straying like sheep, and doing it your own way. But now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian, the 'Overseer', of your souls." The term Peter uses here for "Guardian" would have been familiar to every person who received this letter, because it is the word Homer used in the Iliad to refer to brave Hector, who was left behind in the city of Troy to protect the noble women and innocent young children. Hector was the guardian, the overseer. Peter says that is what the Lord is. "You once were straying like sheep, fighting your own battles, doing it your self. But now you have returned to the Lord, who is both Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. He will

protect you, he will fight for you, he will contend for you." And that is a great word of encouragement to us who are employees!

It is good to be reminded again, Father, that there will be times when we encounter, and have to live under, unjust authority. It is no accident. We have been called for this purpose. And we know that thereby you teach us meekness. We thank you that we can learn this from you -- both from your example and by the power you have provided -- and that, because you live, we can be meek and gentle, and quiet in spirit. Thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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