

The First Letter of Peter
Today's Lesson: 2:11-25

- I. Introduction, 1:1-2
- II. The Possessions of the Believer in Christ, 1:3-12
- III. The Personal Conduct of Believers, 1:13-2:10
 - A. Live prudently, 1:13-21
 - B. Love deeply, vv. 22-25
 - C. Grow constantly, vv. 1-3
 - D. Be worshiping, vv. 4-10

IV. The Public Conduct of Believers, 2:11–5:11

Here the emphasis is social conduct; or, how to live daily in an intolerant world as “resident aliens.” Whereas 1:13-2:10 emphasized personal behavior as resident aliens, the large second section details social or public behavior.

A. In summary, 2:11-12

1. Stated, vv. 11-12a

The two commands, “keep away” and “maintain good conduct,” convey negative and positive actions respectively: avoid lustful circumstances and walk honorably. “Soul” in this instance means the spiritual nature within us.

2. Reasoned, v. 12b

The “so that” indicates the reasons for the previous commands: our lives are a testimony to our values and, if godly, they point others to God. “When He appears” or “in a day of visitation (the articles being absent before “day”)” does not specify the nature of the divine appearance. It could be blessing, such as salvation through the observation of your life or judgment in the day of reckoning. An example of this point may be 3:1-2, wives with unconverted husbands. A clue may be seen in this verse of the type of persecution these resident aliens may have been experiencing, slander and false accusation.

B. In submission, 2:13-3:12

1. Saints to civil authority, 2:13-17

Civil instruction is not plentiful in Scripture: Mark 12:14-17 [and parallels], Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-3, and Titus 3:1-3. Christians are to honor everyone regardless of position, to love fellow Christians, to fear God, and honor the king.

a. The command of civil obedience, vv. 13-14a

Compliance with “every human institution,” every governing authority (or literally “every created thing”) is not an option even if that government is oppressive. Governments possess a realm of authority from God and

should be obeyed; governments that demand what God forbids can be met with passive, not active, disobedience. All authority is sphere authority; it has an assigned role and must operate within its privilege or realm.

Peter is writing during the reign of the demented Nero (54-68) and loses his life to martyrdom in 64 AD. God expects us to be in subjection to governments that are neither Christian nor morally upright.

The demand for obedience extends to those who are appointed by the highest office to rule under them ("governors" such as Pilate, even lesser figures appointed by them).

b. The role of civil government, v.14b

The rightful sphere of governmental authority is to ensure actions that curb wickedness, being given the duty to bear the sword (retribution, revenge), and to promote right actions. Governments that fail to do these things act contrary to the will of God.

c. The reason for obedience to civil government, v.15

Though governments may be hostile to the purposes of God expressed in governance, the believer's proper conduct is a silent antidote and corrective. The way to correct, it seems, is to create alternatives so that it may be seen as a better way for government to conduct itself.

d. The conduct in civil government, v.16

The freedom that we have as Christians, as scattered resident aliens, is to operate in a godly manner and not use our religious freedom as a political ground for active opposition to bad laws. We can and should use legitimate options within the law to seek justice and moral uprightness in our society. We have more freedom politically than Peter could have imagined under Nero and his minions; we should take advantage of it legitimately. To act as Christians outside our sphere of influence is to use religion for wrong reasons, we ought not resort to violence.

e. The conclusion, v.17

Four commands summarize Peter's point of the believer's relation to government.

"Honor all ("men" is not in the text): Christians should be courteous and respectful. Disagreement or violation of rights is no ground for harsh treatment of anyone.

"Love the brothers:" We have an even higher calling when it comes to fellow believers.

"Fear God:" This is another higher obligation for Christians, even higher than loving the brotherhood.

“Honor the emperor.” It is interesting that we are to have the same respect for all people as we do of those who possess status, having a title. Emperors are only people after all!

The first and last commands have to do with the believer’s relation to people, those with status and those without. The two between are hierarchical: first, fear God, and second, love the brotherhood. We have a special duty to God and the saints above others, even governmental officials.

2) Saints to masters, 2:18-25

The Bible does not condemn slavery as an institution. However, slavery was much different than the practice in non-biblical times. Abraham, for example, purchased slaves and was blessed in doing so. However, he made them a part of his family through circumcision (e.g., Eleazar) and supplied them with weaponry for defense. Man-stealing was strictly prohibited, abuse was prohibited, and the family unit was preserved with dignity. In war, captured peoples could be enslaved and people could sell themselves into that state. It did not have the cruelty or moral degradation that slavery often exhibited in later times.

In the first century, Roman servitude was involuntary, and the objects of subjugation were from North of the Sahara. Slaves were generally well treated, paid for their services, and could purchase their freedom. They often rose above the servile class becoming doctors, nurse, teachers, musicians, and skill artisans. The word “slave” is perhaps too strong to convey the idea in our world of terrible cruelty, yet servant is too weak; they were between the two. “Servant” is perhaps the best term in the English language.

In our culture, an equivalent term would be “employee.” It reflects the necessity of a skill and at the same time denotes a lack of economic independence, though “employees” today have more freedom than Roman servants.

a. The proper conduct enjoined, v. 18

The imperative, “be subject,” dominates this section of the letter; it is used with respect to civil authority (2:13) and in the marital bond (3:1).

1) Stated, v. 18a

The instruction seems to encompass those employed in domestic or household duties (the term is not that of “slave” but a household servant). The manner of fulfilling the command is captured in the preposition “with” before the noun. The better way to translate the term is not fear due to the threat of punishment, but respect or reverence (“a healthy desire to avoid displeasure”).

2) Unqualified, v. 18b

While it is easier to respect authority figures that are kind and just, Peter says that we owe the same duty to the scandalous or crooked (the word suggests the possibility of physical mistreatment or dishonesty regarding pay, working conditions, or expectations).

b. The proper grounds declared, vv. 19-25

“For” alerts us that a reason or reasons are forthcoming. The statement of a reason generally follows a command to duty. Here we have two reasons.

1) The favor of God, vv. 19-20

It brings honor to God when we express trust in God by doing what He tells us, particularly when it is disadvantageous.

a) Stated, v. 19

The person who pleases God is one who does not claim his/her rights cry “foul,” or demand equity of treatment; it is one that quietly accepts unfairness as from the Lord. The word “hardship” or pain is better translated “grief or sorrow.” The term is never used of physical suffering, but of mental and emotional anguish.

The command is not to act stoically when mistreated (expressing anger is not the Lord’s way nor merely holding it in. Both are self-serving solutions, that is bearing under the stress with personal stubbornness, resolving not to give in to anger, self-pity, or resentment). It is the opposite of focusing on self; it is to act focusing on God trusting that he knows our case, that his care is never-ending, and God has a purpose in it.

b) Explained, v. 20

The reason for the enjoined behavior is repeated (the pleasing of God), but the circumstance is elaborated. If you do what is wrong and suffer justly consequently that does not honor God. However, if you suffer for doing right, such does honor God.

2) The example of Christ, vv. 21-25

Jesus suffered willingly, unjustly, and silently; he made no defense to avoid mistreatment or sought no retaliation. The result of his willing mistreatment was the salvation of our souls. Good can come from unjust suffering when the sufferer endures in obedience to God.

a) Stated, v. 21

The “this” is the key to the passage. It mostly likely refers to patient endurance amid unfairness that is grounded in trust in God (vv. 19-20).

As Christ followers, we should anticipate no better treatment than that accorded our master. He was unjustly treated and the way he reacted, trusting himself in it to the will of God, should serve as a pattern to us.

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave his master. It is enough for the disciple that he becomes as his teacher, and the slave as his master (Matt. 10:24-25a).”

b) Explained, vv. 22-25

To make the point, Peter draws from the life of our Lord as it relates, it seems, to his conduct during the Passion Week that culminated in his death. His conduct in suffering unjustly is a model and encouragement, the model being that we should endure while trusting God and the encouragement being that though unseen at the time there are significant positive consequences.

(1) His demeanor in life, vv. 22-23

(a) Stated, v. 22

Peter's point is that Jesus never acted in a sinful, selfish manner in deed or word (and hence in thought since that is the root of action). The citation that Peter draws upon is Isa. 53:9-10, the great suffering servant passage. "...although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he was put to grief..."

(b) Explained, v. 23

When unjustly accused by the Jewish leadership, he did not defend himself nor did he use clever, deceptive speech.

“He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so he did not open his mouth (Isa. 53: 7).”

“Pilate was questioning him again, saying, ‘Do you make no answer? See how many charges they bring against you!’ But Jesus made no further answer; so that Pilate was amazed (Mark 15:4-5).”

“... and he (Pilate) entered the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, Where are you from? But Jesus gave him no answer (John 18:9).”

“... do you not think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels (Matt. 26:53).”

“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not as I will, but as thou wilt (Matt 26:39).”

(2) His sacrifice in death, vv. 24-25

Though Jesus could have retaliated, he endured suffering in the will of God and, in doing so, gave us a wonderful example of positive outcomes in the middle of seeming waste by trusting in God's will.

Here is the very heart of the gospel set forth in succinctness! Here are the claims of Christ on our behalf.

(a) His selfless suffering, v. 24a

“He himself (the noun with a pronoun following)” emphasizes the point that Jesus alone did the action defined by the verb, no one else could have done this.

How could he alone uniquely qualify to do this? Jesus alone met the standard for such. Since the standard of debt-payment is absolute conformity to the divine character, the debt-payer had to be God (“God is just...” [Rom. 3:26]). The standard of God’s acceptance is Himself, perfection! The debt-payer had to be a human (the debt had to be paid either by us or one of our kind, punishment being the inevitable consequence of sin), a perfect human (a blighted person needs a redeemer and thus cannot be a redeemer.) The need required a perfect human being that was at the same time God, “The Word became flesh...” (John 1:14).

“Bore” means to take upon himself (to bear, to carry, to endure [“...*he* was numbered among the transgressors” Isa. 53:12d]). That is, God counted our sins against Christ; he was reckoned the archetypical sinner. “...the Lord caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him (Isa. 53:6a).” The Father thought of our sins as belonging to him (“he made him to be sin who knew no sin [II Cor. 5:21]”).

The reference to “tree” (wood or cross) is an allusion to Deut. 21:23 (Gal. 3:13), “cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” In taking on our sin, our debt, he was judged as wicked as if he were us.

(b) His healing suffering, v. 24b

“That” indicates a statement of purpose to follow. The tense of the verb “died” indicates an action that precedes the subsequent verb (“live”). Because of Christ’s cursed death for sin, we died to sin (the tense is normally translated as a past event)! In what sense have we died to sin since it frequently characterizes our action and since the Bible is clear that we all struggle with it? We have died in the sense that its universal, unrelenting grip on our lives has been ended, not its presence in our lives. We have died to sin in two ways: its ultimate penalty and its total domination.

The proof that we have died to sin’s condemning universality is Isa. 53:5; “we were healed.” The “might or may die” is not theoretical; it is factual!!

By Christ's death as our only sin substitute, we have been healed so as now to live in a new way.

(c) His victorious suffering, v. 25

The reason ("for") that we can live righteously (in this case, quietly endure adversity while firmly trusting in God) is that Isa. 53:6 has happened. Like straying sheep, we have turned back to the safety of the shepherd!

The word "turned back" suggests a double reversal, away from a negative (sin) and toward a positive (Christ). Genuine conversion is two-fold and simultaneous: from our past lifestyle to a new one.

Two nouns describe that one to whom we have turned: shepherd and guardian. The first image is that of guiding us, the second protecting us.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lay down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; he guides me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake (Ps. 23: 1-3)." "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11).

Thoughts

1. Our conduct in social relationships should fulfill the obligations delineated by God. Mistreatment by others does not eliminate our duty to obey.
2. Obligations are determined by duties, duties by God. They are not rooted in personal prejudices, qualified by the treatment accorded by others, or dismissed because of the violation of what we cherish as values.
3. Disregarding duties brings no credit to the gospel and no witness to the Savior.
4. Are there limits imposed on the necessity of obedience? Can we resist when an authority oversteps its legitimate sphere of required obedience of us? If so, what is the nature of that resistance? It is to be passive in nature, not active resistance.
5. It is interesting to me that the commands of God are not simply stated; motivation is also revealed (first doctrine is stated and then practice is enjoined). God could simply order our compliance, but we are not merely his mindless subjects; we are his children and as such he treats us the way intimates should be treated. Rules do not require dictatorship though that is often the case in social, earthly affairs; God explains both the what and the why. The way we do things is as frequently important as what we do. Is there a lesson in this passage for us?
6. It is a fact that in social relationships those who have the upper hand often manifest a lack of understanding and compassion. However, that should not be the occasion for us to respond in belligerence, harshness, disobedience or retaliation. Unfairness is not the ground for more unfairness.

7. A major point in our passage today is how to deal with injustice in social relationships, in this case the unwarranted and unsympathetic demeanor of those in authority over us. The right way to deal with injustice is to turn to God in trust that He is one who will make all things right; that He is one who works all things, even pain, for His divine good outcomes whether we understand it or not, that He is the one who understands and cares for us; that He is the one that should always be our joy. These attitudes glorify God! Revenge, stoicism (grim and bear it), huffiness, or mere endurance through hurt are ultimately self-centered responses. God wants us to focus on Him, not our own coping mechanisms. What is your response to unfair treatment?
8. The ultimate example for all of us in conducting our lives is the Lord Jesus. About social mistreatment our text says that Jesus wants us to follow his example of conduct through adversity. He did not seek retaliation nor make a defense of his actions; he focused on his heavenly Father and trusted that nothing happens that does not come with a purpose.
9. The fruit of obedience to God brings immense consequences. It glorifies God; our conduct honors him. It brings benefits that only God knows, but in the case of Christ they were eternal. Do you look beyond the hurt to trust God that he is glorified without taking matters into your own hands?
10. The fruit of his attitude to unjust suffering was the procurement of our salvation! Had he acted any other way than accepting the divine will for his life, you and we would still be dead in our sins. The benefits of trusting God are ultimately revealed at Calvary. What a lesson for all of us!
11. Struggle with sin is not irreconcilable with having died to it. While we died to sin in Christ, the death was to its universal grip not its universal presence. Sin will be something all of us must reckon with until our final redemption. The universal reign of sin has ended; the presence of sin has not! Does this not explain some of your frustrations in your walk with God? Do we not all wish that there were no relapses in our conduct into old ways and habits?
12. Our text for today tells us that pain and disappointment, even misuse by others, is by divine appointment (“...to this you were called (v. 21).” This tells me that such is unavoidable in a fallen world with fallen people in it. As the creation groans for a better day (Rom. 8:22), so do you and I. Where is your focus? Is it where the Apostle Paul places his? “...I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Rom. 8:18).” “If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31).”