

How Should We Respond to Market--Place Injustice?

by Ron R. Ritchie

I recently talked with a young man who had just become a Christian. He had been fired from his job and he wanted to know what the Word of God had to say about injustice in the working place. I was happy to see that despite the fact that he was a young Christian he had the wisdom to see that God was involved in his situation, that God was involved in the process of making things right, and he wanted to learn about that. Also, I talked recently with a young Air Force officer stationed at Moffet Field who is having struggles with one of his superior officers. He described to me such a difficult job situation I asked him why he didn't resign, but he told me he was locked into his job for at least two more years until he had served out his tour of duty.

In our text today, I Peter 2:18-25, we will be looking at a passage that speaks to the two situations I have just mentioned, situations involving real people with real problems in real working conditions. Peter is addressing the problems of Christian slaves, dealing not so much with the issue of slavery itself, but with their masters. These slaves were recently redeemed men and women who had been saved out of the slave market of sin and death and had become 'slaves of Christ.' The question Peter is seeking to answer is, how should these Christian slaves who were seeking to do right respond to unreasonable masters who made them suffer unjustly? Some may say that this passage on slaves and masters is irrelevant to our contemporary world, yet there are, in our 20th century society, comparable positions in the market-place. We find that we willingly place ourselves under the yoke of employment, willingly giving up our rights and becoming servants during the week--at least for 40 hours--plus. We need to understand what God has to say about work. We need to understand reality from God's point of view, not from the point of view of our fellow workers, not from the point of view of what our rights are. I hope we will be able to draw out spiritual principles from this study that will teach us how to respond, as servants of Christ, to unreasonable supervisors who cause us to suffer unjustly although we seek to do right, not wrong.

Peter is writing from Rome to a group of Christians scattered throughout what is today northwest and central Turkey. These Christians were suffering various personal and social trials. They were about to suffer some political trials also, however, because on July 19, 64 A.D., a great fire broke out in Rome which destroyed much of the city and all of its temples and idols. The people of the city blamed Nero for the fire, as they knew he had plans to build a new city. But Nero cleverly turned the blame on the group in the city known as Christians, Christ followers. Their theology, he said, held that the world must end in fire, so they must be the ones who started it. Thus began the first of ten different persecutions of Christians over the next 250 years. In this letter, therefore, Peter writes that in addition to the social and personal sufferings they were facing, Christians should now expect to suffer politically.

In the midst of all these trials the key that would enable them to stand in the day of persecution is given in verse 3 of chapter 1: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.' Keep your minds on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead, Peter is saying, and that you too will rise with him when he comes again. And, because he rose from the dead, he is present right now and he will guard you so you have nothing to fear.

So in the first section of this letter, 1:1 through 2:10, Peter advised these Christians to keep their eyes on the Lord in the midst of their sufferings.

\In the second section, 2:11 through 4-11, Peter says that as aliens and strangers, Christians should do good works so that the Gentiles might see them and glorify God in the day of visitation; then, as citizens who have a dual citizenship in heaven and on earth, he calls on Christians to submit to all human institutions unless their spiritual conscience is violated. Concerning slavery, therefore, Peter instructs Christian slaves to respond to marketplace injustice by two steps. First,

1. Work in the sight of God

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. 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.

At the time Peter wrote this letter the Romans ruled the world. As masters of the known world their policy was to have slaves do all of their work. Slaves were taken as prisoners during the wars fought by the Empire, other slaves were kidnapped, some were sold into slavery as children, some were born into slavery, while others became slaves because they were unable to pay their debts. Slaves came from every rung of the social ladder: doctors, lawyers, candle-makers, butlers, cooks, barbers and clerks. Once they became slaves they were placed under the yoke of Rome. Worse than that, they became non-people. Writing in the third century B.C., the Greek philosopher Aristotle said, 'A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave.' The Roman historian Cato, writing in the first century B.C., said, 'Sell wornout oxen, blemished cattle. . . old tools, old slaves, a sickly slave, and whatever else is useless.' Talk about life being cheap! That is how the masters of the world regarded life in those days. Just think, one day you're a lawyer, a cook, a farmer or whatever, and then suddenly you're caught in the yoke of slavery and you become a living tool. Even your children who were born to you become like sheep; they are no longer yours.

In some ways, this is still happening in our world today. During my last trip to the prisons in Columbia we visited a prison close to the Brazilian border. The warden of that prison regarded all prisoners as animals. One had tried to escape but the guards had shot and killed him and carried him through the prison, hanging from a pole like a deer being brought home from the hunt. This was done to remind the prisoners that they were considered animals who would be shot if they tried to escape.

As Roman society moved from a republic to an empire these barbaric practices slowly gave way to more humane treatment of slaves. Many slaves were being set free, as we see from 1 Corinthians 7. These 'freedmen' were being trained in different skills, set up in business, or were freed to join the Roman army. There were four classes of slaves: those who worked in the mines, those who worked on the farms, those who worked for the cities, and those to whom Peter is writing, the 'house servants.' To this latter group Peter writes, 'Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect.' Why was that so important to Peter, as well as the apostle Paul, as we shall see? Paul gives a clue in his letter to the Philippians, which he wrote from Rome. In chapter 4, verse 22, he writes, 'All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.' There we have a clue that Paul and Peter both knew that the God who was in control of history could use slaves to take advantage of their position to penetrate the society in which they lived. Don't even think about the fact that you're slaves, Peter is saying, but concentrate on the fact that you're slaves of Jesus Christ who desires to work through you for the salvation of all those whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world.

Two questions may have prompted Peter to make this statement. First, how should Christian slaves respond toward their Christian masters? With the entrance of Christianity into the fabric of Roman society, with the Christian doctrine that stated, 'in Christ there is neither slave nor free man,' certain tensions began to surface. Christian slaves met their Christian masters in these house churches; they worshiped together and had communion together; they had love feasts together. Sundays were wonderful but Mondays were weird because they had to again assume the master--slave relationship. Having been elevated to the status of a person on Sunday the slave once again became a tool on Monday.

The second question that came to Peter's mind was, how should Christian slaves respond toward their non--Christian masters who were good and gentle, as well as to those masters who were unreasonable and who treated them unjustly as they sought to do right? Paul, as well as Peter, faced this issue when he wrote his letters to the Ephesians, the Colossians, Titus and Philemon. In those letters Paul avoided extremes which would have torn apart the fabric of Roman society and thereby harmed many slaves as well as their masters. There was a better way to attack the evil of slavery, which Paul gives in 2 Corinthians 10:3-4: 'For though we

walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.' Certainly on the surface, slavery looked like an impregnable fortress. But there was a better way than revolt or the status quo. God could change the circumstances, and the way to begin was for slaves to submit to their masters. From our human perspective, we would say that that was no way to win a war, but Paul's word is, don't try to change things from your human perspective; turn to the God who is in charge of history.

Thus, Peter charges servants to willingly, as a lifestyle, rank under their masters with all respect, until it violates their spiritual conscience, and to suffer the consequences of that. They were to remember that before Christ had come into their lives they were in double bondage: they were slaves of Rome and slaves of Satan. They argued with their masters, they ran away from them, they threatened them and reviled them, and they had to suffer all the physical and emotional consequences of that. But now as Christian servants who had been set free from the slave market of sin and death they were also in double bondage: they were slaves of Rome, but they were also slaves of Jesus Christ. The power of the Holy Spirit would enable them to willingly rank under their masters with all respect, 'as unto the Lord,' as Paul says. So as servants of Christ, Peter declares, willingly rank not only under masters who were good, but also under those who are unreasonable, perverted, corrupt, bent. In the army I served under an unreasonable and bent master-sergeant in North Africa. Many times when I was right he told me I was wrong. He harrassed both me and my wife when we tried to do things right. Later I discovered that this man really was perverted as he was arrested for blackmarketing.

Peter goes on to say why servants were to submit: 'For this find favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly'; or, as the RSV translates this, 'For one is approved if mindful of God . . .', if you keep God in mind; in other words, if you look at your work situation from God's vantage point, not your own. When a Christian servant (a man, not a living tool) bears up while suffering unjustly--when he doesn't run away or strike back--this finds favor with the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-loving God. The servant's conscience is clear and pure before God for he knows who he is really working for. This sorrow is part of his spiritual maturity. Realizing that the Lord was a servant of all and that he was made to suffer unjustly, the servant was to understand that there were greater issues at stake than his immediate injustice: the name of Jesus was at stake as well as the possible salvation of his unreasonable master who was the slave of sin.

We find it hard to think like that, don't we? How many of you think that God is going to save your boss, your manager, your chief, your foreman, as Christ expresses himself in the midst of a situation when you're doing right but your boss judges you wrongly? We need to think along those lines. God is doing something in the work-place which is much greater than we realize.

Verse 20: 'For what credit is there, if when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience?' Peter is saying, 'As Christians, if you have a habit of sinning against your master and he beats you, don't lay there as he is beating you and cry, "I'll bear this patiently as I'm suffering for Jesus' sake." No, you're suffering because you violated God's plan for your life and you violated your position with your master. Don't expect to receive credit from God for that.' 'But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.' We have to be patient with our masters because God our Father sees all, and he is recording our reaction to our masters' harsh treatment. When we respond in this way our masters will not be able to forget it, for we will not react as the world reacts. You have to realize that yours may be the only gospel your master will ever hear. And you may never have to say a word to him. Your response to unjust treatment may be all he needs.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:11: 'For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.' At certain times in our life God may place us in situations where we will have to give up our rights so that his life can flow through us. We must let him be responsible for the end result. Paul writes in Colossians, '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. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.' Do you go to work with the attitude that you are going to work to serve Christ? A friend and I are currently working on a stained-glass window. I was really taken up short recently when I suggested we take a shortcut on a certain

part of the work. My friend said to me, 'No, I'm doing this window for the Lord.' Yes, even working in our own garage we are working for the Lord.' That is how we should be responding in our work-place which desperately needs the salt and light influence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Is that who you are, or are you pepper in the community, irritating your bosses rather than bringing flavor and truth?

There were both slaves and masters in the community to whom Peter was writing. As Christians, they were to allow Christ to be their Master by willingly ranking under him. This love and respect would then begin to permeate from within the cruel institution of slavery, until it was finally abolished by the Emperor Constantine in 314 A.D.

'How should we respond to marketplace injustice'_ even when some of us have unions to represent us, others have grievance boards to deal with management, all of us have certain civil rights, and others can use the courts? Here is how we should respond to unjust suffering: we should work in the sight of God. We willingly rank under good and kind masters as well as unreasonable masters with all respect as unto the Lord, realizing that there are higher things at stake than our rights. It may be God's plan to accomplish salvation and the abolishment of harsh treatment in that work-place through you. Do what you know to be right before the Lord, knowing that at times you will suffer unjustly. And during a period of unjust suffering, patiently endure, for this finds favor with God.

A few weeks ago I received a letter from a friend that speaks of this very thing. Here is what he said: 'My experience has been that there is tremendous freedom when we submit to God's ordained relationships, whereas there is slavery and chaos when we violate them. I have found out the hard way that submission to my boss at work leads to great freedom and enjoyment of my work, whereas rebellion leads to enslavement, jealousy and strife and a bad reputation. That can lead to one's dismissal or resignation if not soon rectified by obedience. I thank God I have learned the freedom of submission . . .' There is a man who understands that God has given him the gift of work, and that he is to work as unto the Lord.

How should we respond to marketplace injustice? First, we should work in the sight of God. Secondly,

2. Walk in the steps of Christ

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow In His steps who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found In his mouth; and while belay 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.

Writing to these slaves of Rome and servants of Christ, Peter recognized their difficulty in having to submit to unreasonable masters who caused them to suffer unjustly while doing good and right, so Peter brings their minds back to the Master whom they are really serving, the Servant of Jehovah, Jesus Christ. He recalls for them the truth of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah. Just like the Messiah, they had been called for the purpose of suffering. Since Christ suffered for them so they too must also suffer because they were part of Christ. Speaking of himself in Matthew 12, talking about his own life and how he was the fulfillment of the great Servant of Jehovah (not as a nation but as a person), Jesus said, 'Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen; My Beloved in whom my soul is well pleased; I will put My Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel, nor cry out; nor will any one hear his voice in the streets. A battered reed He will not break off, and a smoldering wick he will not put out, until he leads justice to victory. And in His Name the Gentiles will hope.' That's what we are crying out for: justice in the market-place!

There is the key to Christianity. First, Jesus told his disciples that he must suffer; secondly, his suffering would be on behalf of others--and it would be unjust suffering--in order that he would provide a ransom for many; thirdly, all who follow him must take up their cross. All this suffering fits in with the plan of redemption, for God is at work through us to call out a people from among the Gentiles. God wants to use you and me in the marketplace tomorrow morning, to call out from all the nations a people for his namesake. He

wants us to do this as willing servants, understanding that we may suffer unjustly in the process.

'Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps.' Peter is not just throwing out an idea so that these slaves can be creative. Here he shows them exactly what he wants them to do as they work, and that is to trace the very footsteps of Jesus. Peter lists five of those steps, taken from Isaiah 53. First, 'He who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth.' Jesus, the unblemished Lamb of God who was willing to die for the sins of man, was rejected, mocked and ridiculed. He was called a blasphemer and a political rebel. But during all that harassment he never once sinned. Nor was any deceit found in his mouth. Responding to the many questions put to him by the high priest, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, Herod and the Roman soldiers, no treachery or falsehood was uttered by him. In fact, he said to the high priest, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in the synagogues, and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret.' He did not do anything to hide who he was or what he had to say.

The second step: 'while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering he uttered no threats.' Here Peter quotes Isaiah 53:7: 'He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet he did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so he did not open his mouth.'

In front of the high priest Jesus was spat upon, beaten with fists, slapped and mocked; in front of the Sanhedrin he was bound like a criminal; when he went before King Herod he was treated with contempt and mocked; Pilate had him beaten and delivered over for crucifixion; when he went before the soldiers he was stripped, a scarlet robe was placed on him, a crown of thorns was placed on his head, he was mocked, he was spat upon, he was beaten with fists and with a reed. But not once during all of this did Jesus ever return any verbal abuse. Not once did he threaten anyone, although he was the Son of God and he knew that his Father could send 12 legions of angels to deliver him.

The third step: 'he kept entrusting himself to Him who judges righteously.' One problem we have as Christians is we don't seem to be able to relate to all of God's attributes at the same time. Not only is God a God of love, grace, patience, peace and forgiveness, he is also a Judge. Peter is saying that as God judged Adam and Eve and cast them out of the Garden, as he judged the people of the earth in Noah's day, as he judged Sodom and Gomorrah, as he judged the wicked Egyptian taskmasters for beating the Israelite slaves, as he even judged Israel for their disobedience and their unfaithfulness and sent them into the Assyrian, the Babylonian and Roman captivities, so will this God continually judge unrighteousness on earth.

Jesus placed himself into the hands of this righteous Judge who would judge the sin that was placed upon him at the cross. Jesus thereby acknowledged God as this righteous Judge. On the one hand, Christ as the sinless Lamb of God suffered as if he were the worst of sinners. He paid the full price of sin--death--consciously recognizing that it was the penalty righteously due sin. He recognized that in letting the shame, the guilt and curse fall upon him the righteous God was judging righteously. On the other hand, because Jesus was sinless and innocent he believed that in due time his Father (who as the righteous Judge guarantees that each man will sooner or later receive what he deserves, if not here then hereafter) would vindicate him as righteous and exalt him by raising him from the grave. God would reward Jesus for what he had willingly endured for others' sake by giving him the right to be the One to save all who by faith believe in him as the Lord and Savior who paid the penalty for their sin by his death.

Therefore, slaves of Rome and of Christ, Peter is saying. as Jesus kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously during his season of unjust suffering, rest your case with the resurrected Lord, your righteous Judge, for the Father has committed all judgment to the Son. 'For an hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice and shall come forth; those who did good deeds to a resurrection of life. those who committed evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.'

Now Peter gives these Christian servants the wisdom and purpose behind our Lord's reason for entrusting himself to his Father: more was at stake than immediate justice. The fourth step: '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.' Peter is saying that their hearts ought to be filled with thanksgiving that God did not step in and demand immediate justice at the trial of Jesus. If he had, none of us would have been saved because Jesus would not

have had to go to the cross. The stakes are higher than the immediate satisfaction of justice. Peter wants them to know that their sins are forgiven, the power of sin has been broken and they have power to live a life of righteousness. Even as slaves, even under terrible conditions they could be like Jesus Christ. Jesus was willing to go to the cross, and by his wounds they were spiritually healed from sickness unto death, which is sin.

In the fifth step, Peter reminds his spiritual children who they were, where they were, and how God had provided for their care and protection. 'For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.' Here Peter quotes Isaiah 53:6: 'All of us like sheep have gone astray; each has turned to his own way.' As slaves of Rome and as slaves of sin these people were threatening their masters, they were running away, they were argumentative. They were sheep without a shepherd, headed for death. A sheep without a shepherd cannot make it. But by placing their faith in Jesus Christ they had 'returned to the Shepherd and Guardian.'

He is the Great Shepherd spoken of in Isaiah 40: 'Like--shepherd he will tend his flock; in his arms he will gather the lambs and carry them in his bosom.' This great and wonderful Shepherd was Jesus, who said, 'I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.' Not only did these slaves return to the Shepherd of their souls who would lead them in paths of righteousness, but they returned to the Guardian, the Bishop, the Overseer of their souls. Not only would he feed them and guide them, this Overseer would protect them in the midst of all the spiritual warfare that was going on in their society. Peter encourages these slaves to follow in the steps of Christ and allow God to protect them from their unreasonable masters. We too should allow God to guide us as we work in the marketplace. Let him be the final resting place of all our cares, our worries and our fears.

The great majority of us will go back to the marketplace tomorrow morning. Some of us as servants will willingly place ourselves under the yoke of employment. For 40 hours-plus some will serve good and gentle masters, while others will serve unreasonable employers, managers, chiefs, foremen or senior officers. Some of them may cause you to suffer unjustly for doing what is right. Some of you will say to yourselves, 'My goodness, I just heard a message on unjust suffering. That's exactly what's happening to me and it's only 10 o'clock!' Some of you are masters: you are encouraged to be just and fair, knowing you too have a Master in heaven.

Any way you slice it, we are all going to put ourselves under the yoke of employment tomorrow morning. The question is, 'How should we as Christians respond to market-place injustice?'_even when we have union representatives, grievance boards, civil rights and the courts? It seems clear from this passage that our attitude is the key to how we respond. We should remember that we are working in the sight of God. He is our Master and our Lord. Suffering is part of the job so that Christ can express himself through us. Secondly, Christ is our model. We are to constantly refresh our minds, remembering how he lived in the midst of injustice. Let us walk in his steps understanding that suffering is part of our spiritual calling, entrusting ourselves to the righteous Judge. Let us realize a because of Christ's death that we who place our faith in him are given life, and understand that we are part of his wonderful plan of redemption as he expresses himself through us in the midst of unjust situations.

The stakes are higher than our rights. The stakes are the salvation of humanity, the salvation of your boss. He will see Christ in you. That's what will turn him around. When you go to work tomorrow let your bosses call it a place of employment, but you as slaves of Christ can call it your ministry. Reflect the very life of Christ there so that others may hear the good news and receive the joy of a living hope because you were willing, as part of the great plan of God, to suffer unjustly, even when you were doing right.

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Ron R. Ritchie
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