



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 1 Peter: Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair
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I want to begin by sharing something pretty profound. I'm going to put this in the category of "Newsflash". You're probably going to want to write this down. Here it is: Sometimes life isn't fair! It's kind of in the newsflash, "Hey, Newsflash, sometimes life isn't fair!" I think we all understand, and there's a variety of reasons why we might feel that way, but sometimes life isn't fair, because the people around us treat us unfairly. Well, that's the question we want to wrestle with. How do we as the people of God respond when people treat us unfairly?

If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Peter, Chapter 2. we are working our way through 1 Peter; we find ourselves in Chapter 2. Peter has told us in verse 9 that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession. Why? So that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. So how do we do that? How do we proclaim this life-changing message? We learned that God's will for each of us as Christians is that we abstain from fleshly lusts and that we do right. We do good in order to silence the critics who want to slander us. Then he begins in Chapter 2 to go through different, specific kinds of arenas or areas where we are to do good. We looked at what it means to do good as a citizen in submission to the governing authorities. We pick it up in verse 18 and we talk about what does it mean to do good as slaves? He says:

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect... (*NASB, 1 Peter 2:18a)

The word servants there is the Greek word that refers to a household servant. So, there is another word that deals with maybe a little more intense level of slavery, but servant isn't completely accurate. This is a slave; it's just a household slave. But it does open all kinds of discussion—things we need to talk about to make sense of this passage. Over the years I've heard some people say that the Bible is kind of an archaic book, and it promotes slavery. That would be just a completely ignorant statement, on the basis both of not understanding what the Bible says, nor understanding 1st century Roman culture. One of the things that's critically important is to understand the dramatic differences between slavery as we experienced it here in America and slavery in the 1st century Roman Empire.

So first of all, to understand what happened here in America, there is no question that it was sinful, it was offensive, and it totally grieved the heart of God - contrary to everything we believe as people made in the image of God, all of us equal before God in every way. There may have been those in that movement that used the Bible to defend their position, but people

have misrepresented the truth of Scripture for two thousand years. That doesn't mean that's what the Bible actually says. It's also helpful to remind ourselves that the movement to abolish slavery, both in the UK and here in America, was driven by people who understood the truths of Scripture and were passionate about acting on what God had to say in the Bible. It's equally true of the Civil Rights Movement in the 60's; it was generated as an outflow of the truth of Scripture.

In a 1st century Roman culture, there were many differences to what we would think of as slavery today. So, for starters, it had nothing to do with race; it wasn't race-based at all. Some of the slaves were prisoners of war, which was common in the ancient world. So that would have been some of these Roman slaves, but by this time in the Roman Empire it was more likely to be those who were simply born into slavery because their mothers, particularly were in slavery. There were even those in the Roman Empire that willingly sold themselves into slavery, for some people, they could actually live better, and prosper more by selling themselves into slavery than life apart from that. About one-third of the Roman Empire was made up of slaves. Slaves in the Roman Empire could be educated; many of them were highly educated - more than their masters. They were doctors; they were teachers; they were business men and women. Slaves could own property; they could have families; they could raise children. They were paid a reasonable wage and it was entirely possible, out of that wage, to save up enough money to buy your own redemption. Usually by about age thirty, slaves had purchased their own redemption and were considered to be free. Most of the slaves generally were treated decently, but slaves were considered to be the property of the master. Therefore, there was always potential for abuse and that did happen. In the 1st century Roman Empire, you have to remember these are Christians, most of them Jewish, that have fled Palestine because of the persecution. They have fled into Asia Minor, so they are strangers and aliens. There is a level of persecution that is about to intensify dramatically under Nero, so to imagine that these Christian slaves could somehow bring about dramatic change in the Roman Empire is really rather ridiculous.

It would be like thinking of a Christian in North Korea today. What is the chance of a Christian or a group of Christians in North Korea protesting the government and living to tell about it? It's that same kind of dynamic. The Bible isn't promoting slavery, but Peter understands that many of these believers are slaves in a very dangerous environment. There is really nothing they can do to change it right now, so they need to be very thoughtful about how they live out their lives for their sake and the sake of the other believers around them. Again, you think about a group of Christians in North Korea protesting the government, it's likely that many would be slaughtered because of it. So, it isn't just your life, but the lives of many that are at risk. So that's kind of the flavor behind Peter's instruction for how they are to live as slaves in the Roman Empire.

So, he says: Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect.

That word respect is the Greek word from which we get our word phobia; it's a word that means fear. It carries the idea of being genuinely afraid of their masters, in the sense that if

they displease them, if they make them angry, the potential of what they could do to them is unimaginable. These masters could pretty much do as they please with no recourse. So, what he's saying to these slaves is, "You need to be very thoughtful and aware of the potential damage they can do if you upset them."

There was a bit of a problem. As these people were coming to faith in Christ and understanding their freedom in Christ, that there was a potential for rebellion. "I am now free; I don't have to do that anymore." As a matter of fact, the slander that Peter referred to had to do with the idea that Christians are rebellious against the government. You think about, go all the way back to Jerusalem, and as Christians exploded after the resurrection of Christ—tens of thousands—the religious establishment that kind of ran the show were now accusing them of being rebellious, of not submitting to authority. There was this understanding that the Christian's ultimate allegiance was to God and not to Caesar. Therefore, they were rebellious against Rome, and there was kind of this undercurrent of Christians being troublemakers and being rebellious, which was behind a lot of these comments. That's why Peter said to them, "Yes, it is true you are free in Christ, but you are not free to sin; you are not free to rebel. You are free to be a bond slave to Christ. Therefore, be a good citizen. Here's how to conduct yourselves as slaves". So that's kind of the flavor behind Peter's instruction for how they are to live as slaves in the Roman Empire.

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...perverse, crooked, unfair is what that word means. Verse 19:

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

When it says this finds favor, that word favor is the Greek word *charis*, typically translated grace. Basically, the idea is this: that you as a Christian—we as the people of God—are part of the grace story. This amazing story: we once were not a people of God; we once were under condemnation—we were declared to be enemies of God—and now we are the people of God. We are God's own possession; we are God's own children—all that is on the basis of the grace and mercy of God. So, the grace story is our story. Therefore, the idea is to respond rightly, not only to those that are kind and gentle—everyone responds rightly to them—but how you respond to those that treat you unfairly, reflects the reality of the grace story in our own lives. We are conscious is what Peter says, if you are conscious of what God did for you, then he is asking you to offer the same to those that treat you unfairly. Verse 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.

So basically what he said is: it's not just when people are kind and gentle—everybody responds well to that—and if you are receiving some level of punishment because you have disobeyed, you're not going to impress anyone, even if you endure it patiently, people are going to say you had it coming; it's your own fault. What provides the opportunity for a powerful witness is when we respond rightly when we are treated unfairly. The natural instinct is to react back. So, when we as the people of God respond with patience, we respond with grace and mercy to being treated unfairly, there's something different about that. There's something distinct; there's something that would cause the critics to back up and wonder what is going on and what makes this person different?

So, let's be clear. We're talking about 1st century slaves, with no real recourse when they are being treated unfairly. So, Peter is instructing them how to respond to rightly represent Christ. We would not understand that to mean, that if someone in 21st century America is in some sort of an abusive relationship, it somehow pleases God to just put up with it. That would be a terrible misunderstanding of the text. You are not a 1st century slave; you do have choices; you do have a recourse. God would not be pleased to see people just endure abusive relationships.

So with that understanding, we kind of move it to just relationships that are difficult, that are unfair—ways you are treated at work, ways you're treated in your family, ways you're treated at school, ways you're treated with a coach—that kind of just unfair treatment. Maybe at work there's a lot of politics and you don't play that particular game and you are treated unfairly as a result of it. Whatever it may be, it's an application for us today, which probably describes all of us in many environments. So how do you respond?

We as the people of God understand at one time, we were sinful and offensive to God, nothing more than sinners and misfits and losers, and yet rather than experiencing the condemnation and rejection we deserve—which would be justice—we have received grace and mercy. We have experienced God's forgiveness. He has made us His people. Our story is the grace story. If that's true, conscious of that's how God has treated us, then what God is saying is, "I am asking you as a witness to the life-changing power of Jesus in you, to respond to those who treat you unfairly as I have responded to you, in order to proclaim the excellencies of He who has taken us from darkness into His marvelous light."

Now stop and think about how dramatically different this is than the culture in which we live. Because we as a culture have decided to be our own gods, we are moving down this pathway of secularism—that everything in life is about me. It's about my little world; it's about what I think is right and wrong. Therefore, we are selfish and self-centered to the core, and because of that we are keenly aware of everything to us that seems unfair. It seems like we're just offended by everything. Every week it's something new to be offended by. We are constantly viewing ourselves as victims; we are offended by everything. Now one of the things that is interesting about this is that we, as a culture, claim that there are no moral absolutes. So, we claim to be relativists—that there are no moral absolutes, that morality is relative, and yet every week we're offended by the way people treat us. Now stop and think about this: If we were true relativists, the best we could do is say, "I don't like the way you're treating me," but I can't say

that it's right or wrong because there is no such thing as right or wrong. But we don't say that. We say, that "I have a moral standard, and you have violated it, and by the way, you are wrong! You are so wrong you owe me an apology," which is, in essence, saying, "My moral standard applies to you and you have violated it; therefore, you owe me an apology." It's just a reminder that, at the end of the day, nobody actually lives that way. Nobody fully buys into this relativism; we all think there's a sense of right and wrong, and when somebody violates that, we don't hesitate to say so. I've been convinced for years that relativism is nothing more than an excuse to do as we please, but nobody actually lives that way.

So, in a culture that is so selfish, that is so self-centered, that is constantly offended by everything- it seems endless - think how dramatic it would be if there were a group of people, when treated unfairly, respond with grace and mercy. We endure with an unusual patience that is so other than the rest of the culture, that it causes people to kind of back up and wonder, "Who are these people and what makes them respond so differently? How serious is this? Well verse 21:

For you have been called for this purpose... (Vs. 21a)

This is not a suggestion; this is not something to go home and chat about. It is for this purpose: that we have been called as the people of God.

Arnie: So, Bryan, you couldn't be more clear. This is not a suggestion. Each one of us is called to be the "other than" person. It's going to take a lot of patience, a lot of listening. It almost seems impossible.

Bryan: Well, it is very hard, but when you think about it, isn't that the point? The point is, our choice to respond differently when things are unfair or difficult, is what sets us apart. So, if it wasn't hard, there wouldn't be a basis by which people would notice us.

Arnie: You know, you're so level all the time. I've never seen you get sucked in to a situation that a lot of us get sucked into. How do you keep this?

Bryan: Well, I think part of it's just, keeping clear the mission. You know, if it was true that the purpose of life was health, wealth and prosperity, then every time something happens that's not in alignment with that, it would be reason for anxiety or fear or anger. But the mission requires a distinction from the culture, for them to notice us and have an interest in us, we just have to be different. So, you kind of settle the fact we are going to be different, and that's not an easy road to travel.

Cara: He just has Patti call the cable company, so she can lose it on them instead of him.

Bryan: Right. You do it, honey.

Cara: So, we talked yesterday about considering how to be more strategic, to win favor with the unbelieving world as part of our witness. This would be a good example of that then.

Bryan: I think it's a great example. As strange as this may seem, the fact that we live in a culture with so much anger, so much fear, so much anxiety - I mean it's like over the top - that one of the ways our light shines most brightly is we're other than that. So as difficult as it is, it's created an enormous opportunity for the light of the Gospel to shine.

Cara: So, we use words like strategy and strategic now for the last couple of days. That we're at battle, but our battle isn't necessarily putting our dukes up and getting into fisticuffs with someone. It's being...

Arnie: It's the exact opposite. That's what's so frustrating. [Right].

Cara: Being nice to them. [Right].

Arnie: It just kills.

Cara: I'm finally getting it.

Bryan: If we think standing up for Jesus means we look like what's happening in the rest of culture, there's no distinction. There's no holiness. In a sense, we're not other than.

Cara: We want to go to Peter, and we want to start cutting off some ears, but maybe we just need to bring it down a few notches.

Arnie: So, I was fascinated by your explanation of first century slavery and the Bible's position on that. How does that relate though to modern day work life?

Bryan: Yeah, so people make ridiculous accusations, that the Bible promotes or supports slavery, which is just a complete lack of understanding of the ancient world and how it functioned. About a third of the Roman Empire was made up of slaves. They were people that were in debt. They were prisoners of war. I think that's what people don't think about. In the ancient world, what did you do with a prisoner of war? Either killed them or you turned them into a slave. So, there's just no comparison with what's happened here in our country. But it's also not comparable to everyday work life. It's not apples to apples, but you can gain some principles. [Right].

Bryan: So, you think about a Christian in North Korea, do they have the ability to rise up and overpower the government? Well that would be suicide, not only for them, but for their fellow Christians. That's the way it was in the first century for the slaves. It was ridiculous to think they're going to rise up and overpower the Roman government. So, Peter's instructing them how to live in that environment. And it has overlap into our lives as employers and employees of submission, of respect, of dealing with authority. So, there's a lot of things in there. We're

going to work in environments that are good and we're going to work in environments that are bad. Sometimes it's pleasant, sometimes it's unpleasant, but it's in the midst of the most difficult circumstances that the light shines. So that's where the overlap or the application is.

Arnie: So, when people call me a slave driver, that's not so bad. That's a compliment.

Cara: Well, it actually seems like a pretty good deal. And as you were describing it, I was looking at my dogs and going, this is what it looked like. They get free medical care. My dog just got two root canals. [Oh my.] I mean, so free dentistry and meals and a roof over their head. I mean, it's a pretty good deal, depending on whose house you were put into.

Bryan: Yeah. You know, Roman slaves, it ranged from a pretty good life - some intentionally sold themselves into slavery; it was a better life - to horrible, [right.] And everything in between. But the fact is they couldn't do anything about it. And so, Peter's telling them how to live as slaves and in a culture where they're being persecuted, the last thing that Christians want is to bring more attention to themselves. Either they're going to be killed or their friends and relatives are going to be killed. So, it's not an apples to apples, but you still figure out how do we work and live under people in authority, bosses and employers.

Cara: Just from an evangelistic standpoint. I mean, what a great way for God to infiltrate these Roman homes. [Yeah]. Yeah, kind of like goTandem, it's a good way to infiltrate, to evangelize to people, to put that app on their phone for them, so they can grow their relationship.

Arnie: You know, some of us struggle sharing our faith openly. And one of the things, especially as a guy I can do for other guys and stuff, casual conversation is, "Hey, try this app. You know, our whole thing is to help you move closer to Jesus today than yesterday. Give it a try." And we find, I think it's 53% of the people inside of our Bible engagement app are either nonbelievers or they don't have a biblical view of Jesus Christ. You know, they'll say, yeah, I'm a Christian, I was born in America. Or yeah, I'm a Christian, I go to "X" church. But they really don't have a saving knowledge. So it's a very simple way to start the evangelism discipleship process, especially for those of us that just aren't openly sharing with everybody we meet every day.

Cara: Yeah. I get verses all the time. Well, when it pings me at nine is how I set it, and then I can pass those on to other people. Gotandem.com, do it.