

## ***A PEOPLE IN THE WORKPLACE***

### **1 Peter 2:18-25**

**December 7, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

In the news over the past few years have been accounts of pharmacists who have been targeted by employers and in court rulings for refusing to dispense what is known as “the morning after pill.” Taken up to five days after sexual relations, the pill effectively causes an early-term abortion, leading to the destruction of a fertilized egg. Certain pharmacists, many of them Christians, have refused to fill these prescriptions as a matter of conscience. In some states, such as Illinois where one of the most prominent cases developed in 2005, health-care providers are offered protection by law which allows what is termed a “right of conscience” for physicians and other medical professionals to refuse to perform abortions or similar medical procedures. However, subsequent to the now famous stand taken by four pharmacists, the governor of the state of Illinois ordered that pharmacists were not included in the health-care providers covered by the statute and issued an “emergency order” with the force of law that declared that pharmacists who failed to fill these prescriptions can face sanctions and could lose their jobs and even more their professional status. One pharmacist who refused gave the reason for his refusal, “Ordering me to do this would be like ordering all doctors to perform abortions. You just can’t expect pharmacists to do this.” The New York Times, a paper considered to have a liberal agenda and worldview, referred to a right of conscience for pharmacists as “an intolerable abuse of power by pharmacists who have no business forcing their own moral or ethical views onto customers who may not share them.” In the paper’s blunt assessment: “Any pharmacist who cannot dispense medicines lawfully prescribed by a doctor should find another line of work.”<sup>1</sup>

While this certainly represents a peculiar case in the workplace, it provides an illustration of what the believer might expect from those whose worldview is not biblically grounded. There are times when Christian ethics and medical or business ethics collide. How then should the believer respond? Were these pharmacists right in denying prescriptions, even when told by employer and in some cases law to fill them? And if they suffer the consequences meted out by their employers, is that fair? Should they fight? If so, how should they?

Peter addresses some of these questions, at least in principle, in our text this morning. While we may never face a dilemma of the ethical proportion of dispensing abortion drugs, we probably will and I would suggest should face opposition to our beliefs in the workplace. Further, there are probably times when we thoroughly disagree with the boss, even if the boss is usually in our corner, having the same biblical worldview as we. How then is the Christian employee to act?

## **I. The Primary Motivation for Our Suffering (2:18-21a)**

### **1. A practical illustration of suffering (v. 18)**

Peter begins by issuing a command in which the context would be understood by those who would receive his letter. “**Servants,**” he wrote, “**be submissive to your masters with all respect.**” The NIV and other translations have “slaves.” I was asked the other day how I would approach what appears here to be a rather touchy topic. Many in history have looked at this and

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<sup>1</sup> See R. Albert Mohler, [http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary\\_read.php?cdate=2005-04-13](http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2005-04-13), accessed 12/5/2008.

other writings in the New Testament to justify their belief that God condoned slavery as an institution. We in the South are somewhat familiar with the whole issue given our history. However, Peter here does not speak to the institution of slavery as it existed in the nineteenth century, nor does he, Paul, or God condone such an institution, even as it existed in the early church. When we speak of those institutions as ordained by God, we see three clearly stated in Scripture: 1) Family, 2) Government, and 3) the Church. Slavery as an institution was not ordained by God. It is an invention of man. Therefore, while God allowed slavery, that does not mean He condoned it, especially in its gross abuses. Neither did Peter, neither did Paul.

With this understanding, who were these “servants?” These were household servants, domestic slaves. This type of slavery was common in the first century. Well over half of the citizens would have served in this capacity and it served as their only means of support. Life was often difficult for them. They were under the control of their masters and had basically no independence. They often suffered brutal mistreatment from their masters. Children born in slavery belonged to the masters rather than the parents. Slaves had no legal rights, and masters could beat them, brand them, and abuse them physically, verbally and sexually. After a period of time, a slave could purchase their freedom in a process called manumission. However, this was usually only available to urban slaves, and most had no hope in the process. This was the way the world of business functioned in the first century. Again, we must remember that the New Testament nowhere commends slavery as a social structure or grounds it in the created order. It regulates the institution as it exists in society, but it nowhere commends it. So Peter’s words should not be taken as an endorsement. Peter doesn’t condemn or commend the institution of slavery but accepts it as a part of society.

With this in mind, how do these words then apply to us today? As I stated, slavery as it existed in Peter’s time was the social structure for doing business. Today, that social structure would exist more in an employee/employer relationship rather than slave/master. But the principle that Peter teaches is the same. The believing employee is to submit to, to come under, to obey his employer, not only when it is easy to do so, but when it is difficult, when our employer is “unreasonable,” literally “perverse.” Even when we are treated unfairly, Peter says that we are to show respect to those in authority in the business place. As we saw last week in submitting to governing authorities, Peter does not suggest that we submit to evil or perverseness itself, but to the man who is evil or perverse. We are not to obey when asked to do something that we know is against God. Then we must take a stand against evil. But even in taking a stand, we must take care that we do it in a way that shows respect. Those pharmacists who refused to dispense the abortion drug were right to take a stand. However, how they took their stands is important as well. Remember, in situations such as these, the gospel is at stake.

But what about us? We probably haven’t been beaten by our employer or asked to do something like fill a deadly prescription. But many of you do face hostility at times from your employer on a lesser scale. However, it is these little battles that often lead us into disobedience. When you disagree with the boss, do you show a content submission? Or do you go to others in the office and gripe and grumble? That is not submission. Do you go to great lengths to tear your employer down, trying to get as many people on your side as possible? That is not submission. Yes, you might be treated with gross injustice. Peter says, “Submit.” He then gives the purpose for us to submit, especially in situations that are “unreasonable.”

## **2. God’s divine purpose for suffering (vv. 19-21a)**

“For” introduces Peter’s justification for this difficult command to submit, especially when it pertains to unruly masters. There is a phrase that Peter uses that serve as bookends in verses 19-20 that reveals the purpose for these times of unjust suffering, “**this finds favor with God.**”

Peter gives the reason for the command, first in a general way in v. 19 and then in a more specific way in v. 20.

First, notice the slight change in Peter's imperative to endure suffering. He now broadens his scope beyond just that of servants to **"a person,"** speaking directly to all believers. There is a condition stated that must be met to receive the reward, the reward being to find favor with God and receive the promised benefits for those who please Him. That condition is to **"bear up under sorrows when suffering unjustly."** This is a mark that one is a believer. It carries the idea of a constant bearing of pain, suffering, or turmoil that is unfairly brought upon by the wicked. However, and this is the point of Peter's teaching, this unjust suffering receives God's approval. Peter states that this person, under duress, bears up under it **"for the sake of the conscience toward God."** They know that if they endure unjust suffering because of their relationship with God that their God will reward them. Peter seems to have in mind the rewards tied to that future inheritance, but it would also include the more immediate blessings of God's grace and favor that we recognize on this earth. That is the general principle that Peter gives in v. 19.

Peter then speaks more specifically to the principle in v. 20. He begins by asking a question to which the answer is self-evident. He does so to make sure these believers understood that there is a suffering that is not praiseworthy. **"For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience?"** In other words, one should not expect that suffering they receive as a result of their sinful actions, suffering that they deserve, will find favor with God. Jesus used a similar argument in relation to love and action towards your enemy.

**Luke 6:32-34** – <sup>33</sup> "If you love those who love you, what credit is *that* to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is *that* to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is *that* to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same *amount*."

Peter then reminds them that the only suffering that finds God's favor is that which is conscious of Him, not simply getting what one deserves while being unmindful of Him. It is only when **"you do what is right and suffer for it,"** patiently enduring it for His sake, that you can expect God's grace to meet and deliver from and through the need, as well as His gracious blessings for a delightful obedience. Again, Peter addresses the subject of God's divine purpose for suffering in the life of a believer for doing good. Jesus put it this way in the last of the Beatitudes:

**Matthew 5:11-12** – <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great."

To ensure that his readers understood God's divine purpose for suffering, Peter added that the believer has been called for this purpose. Their present sufferings for good were all part of God's divine plan. This harkens back to before the foundation of the world when God chose a people for Himself to be a holy and blameless people (Eph. 1:4). God's wisdom in the matter includes suffering for good as part of that process of sanctification. There is no greater mark in the life of a believer than this idea of patient suffering in the midst of evil. One writer suggests

this is a call, rooted in our conversion, from self-seeking and self-satisfaction to suffering and self sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> Lest we forget this wonderful truth, Peter sets forth Christ as a reminder.

## **II. The Supreme Example for Our Sufferings (2:21b-25)**

How did Christ react when He was treated unjustly? In mentioning Christ, Peter reminds his readers not only of *what* Christ accomplished but *how* He accomplished it in obedience to the Father. There are perhaps no greater words in the entire letter, a letter that was written to encourage those who were in the midst of suffering, than the words, “**Christ also suffered for you.**” That little word “**also**” identifies Christ with our sufferings and our sufferings with Christ. “**Since**” He has suffered for us, the Christian can gain strength in the midst of the storm. Christ’s sufferings are our sufferings; His patience is our patience; His way of handling injustice is our way of handling injustice.

That is exactly what Peter suggests in setting the sufferings of Christ before his readers. His suffering provided “**an example**” for them to follow. You children remember those first writing tablets in school, the ones with all the lines on the pages with dashed letters for you to trace, carefully following the curves and angles of each letter. That is what the word “**example**” means. Christ provided a copy for us to follow, a pattern to trace. He is, in His sufferings, an example for us to imitate, literally, “**to follow in His steps,**” to walk where He walked. He is not simply to be admired from afar as an example but the believer is to follow Him as their guide. Where do His footsteps lead? Edmund Hiebert answers, “His footsteps lead into the valley of humiliation, even to its lowest and darkest depths, but they also surely and confidently lead through the valley, ending at the throne of glory.”<sup>3</sup>

Peter’s description of Christ’s path as our example in suffering is shown by both His life and His death. Here we have echoes of that marvelous tragedy found in Isaiah 53 which graphically details the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ.

### **1. Christ’s perfect life (vv. 22-23)**

Peter demonstrates the life of Christ both in what He did not do as well as by what He did. This is the pattern, the example that we are to follow. First, He “**COMMITTED NO SIN.**” The context, both in Isaiah 53 and here, is a particular application of Christ’s conduct at Calvary where the intensity of His sufferings was greatest. But the original word order and tense expands beyond that day to the entire life of Christ, literally, “Sin not He did,” stressing that in no time in Christ’s life did He succumb to sin. Not as a child, not as a young adult in Joseph’s workshop, not in the temptations of Satan in the wilderness, not when it was said that He was possessed by a devil, not when treated unjustly by the religious elite, and not during His trials and execution. “Sin not He did.” His actions are accentuated in v. 23. “**While being reviled,**” slandered, unjustly treated, He did not return it. He suffered patiently, making no threats because He understood that vengeance was not His but the Father’s. Even though He suffered the grossest of injustices, He did not retaliate.

Similarly, Jesus did not sin with His lips. There was not “**ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH.**” “**While suffering, He uttered not threats.**” As incredible as it is that Jesus did not sin in His actions, demonstrating great restraint, it is even more incredible to me that He did not even speak in a sinful manner. He was silent, particularly in the midst of His greatest suffering, when He was led like a Lamb to His slaughter. He did not even try to defend Himself. He was

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<sup>2</sup> Richard P. Belcher, *Ministry Helps in 1 Peter*, 52.

<sup>3</sup> D. Edmund Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 183.

struck in His face, crowned with thorns, beaten with a reed, scourged, forced to bear His own cross, and crucified, murdered at the hands of godless men. Despite this unjust treatment, He never even mentioned the punishment that awaited them. He never threatened His executioners to their face, nor did He cry out to others for help.

But we see His strength and patience reinforced when we notice what He did. While He did not sin or plead His case before men, He did plead His case before the righteous Judge. He entrusted His care and case to God rather than defending Himself. He acknowledged the sovereignty of God above His earthly circumstances. And He pled His case before the Father by His actions. He realized that in allowing such shame and patiently enduring the pain and curse that fell upon Him, God's righteous purposes were being accomplished. The only way that God could judge mankind righteously was by His wrath somehow being satisfied. Then, and only then, could God be both just and justifier of the one who has faith in Christ (Rom. 3:26). On the other hand, Jesus knew that because He was sinless, God, the righteous Judge, would vindicate Him. That He did when three days after the gruesome events on Golgotha, God raised Him from the dead. "Sin He did not," and He entrusted Himself to the righteous Judge.

That is the example we are to follow. When we recognize what Christ accomplished in obedience to the Father and the sufferings that came with it, when we understand that we serve a Master that is not of this earth and we will answer to the righteous judge one day, then we can endure suffering patiently. One of those pharmacists understood this.

"When it is my professional opinion that a patient does not need a drug or that the drug might harm the patient, it is my duty to inform the patient of the dangers—and in some instances to refuse to fill the prescription. I also know that one day I must answer to my creator. I have chosen to practice a profession that improves the quality of life, and I believe that any action I take that causes death will have implications when I am judged for the things I have done on this earth."<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Christ's purposeful death (vv. 24-25)**

Peter did not leave Jesus as just an example to be followed. Lest we should think that Christ's death was designed merely for an example of patience under suffering, Peter adds a more glorious effect and design for it—atonement. The reason that Christ endured the suffering at the hands of men, the reason that He bled and died as a sacrifice for us, the reason He bore our sins in His body on the cross, becoming sin for us, taking the curse for us, bearing the wrath of God for us, was so that "**we might die to sin and live to righteousness.**" Redemption from sin has an intended effect. The believer is to "sin not" and entrust themselves to righteousness.

It is only possible for our Lord's example to be reproduced in our lives when we have accepted Him as our atonement. That is what we celebrate at this Lord's Table. We remember His atonement and the effect it has in our lives. Our deepest spiritual wounds have been forever healed by the divine Healer. We were sheep going wherever our misguided minds and desires took us. But now we have returned to our Shepherd, entrusting our lives to Him. You see, we needed an example, but we needed much more. We needed a Savior!

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<sup>4</sup> Mohler blog, [http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary\\_read.php?cdate=2005-04-13](http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2005-04-13), accessed 12/5/2008.