

1 Peter 2:18-25

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Note: In this sermon I will be using he/his a lot. I'm doing so because it's easier to do so rather than going he/she or his/her every time rather than for any theological reason.

18 You who are slaves must accept the authority of your masters with all respect. Do what they tell you—not only if they are kind and reasonable, but even if they are cruel.

19 For God is pleased with you when you do what you know is right and patiently endure unfair treatment.

20 Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong. But if you suffer for doing good and endure it patiently, God is pleased with you.

21 For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps.

22 He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone.

23 He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly.

24 He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed.

25 Once you were like sheep who wandered away. But now you have turned to your Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls.

The Context of this Passage:

When we look at a passage like this we really need to understand the context in which we find it. For this we need to go back to 1 Peter 2 verses 11 and 12 as Graeme mentioned in his last sermon:

11 Dear friends, I warn you as “temporary residents and foreigners” to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls.

12 Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbours. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honourable behaviour, and they will give honour to God when he judges the world. (1 Peter 2:11-12)

Peter has been talking about what God has accomplished in Christ for us, of the greatness of our salvation and of our priceless inheritance and has said that if really believe this then we need to live holy lives because we have been bought or redeemed with a great price. We are now a new people, a people built into a living temple with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. And so we no longer are people who belong to this world. Our eyes are on the inheritance that is going to come to us and we see ourselves as temporary residents and foreigners in this world as we look to the day of our salvation when we will take up residency in our eternal home – the new heavens and the new earth. This world remade without sin. So in light of all this we need to live lives that even if we are accused of doing wrong, those who accuse us will give praise to God on the day he judges the world for they will see our behaviour in the light of the God we serve. It is in the light of all this that Peter then goes on to tell us to respect all human authority, not only the king and his officials but even our masters and employers.



Is it Relevant for Us Today?

The first question we need to ask when we look at this passage though is – is it relevant for us? The NLT has – *you who are slaves*. The NIV has *slaves, submit...*, the KJV has *servants, be subject to*. So what are we actually talking about here – slaves or servants. The Greek word actually used here means a household servant which could either mean a slave or someone who was hired and paid to do the work, or an employee in our modern terminology. So, in other words, yes – this is relevant for us as both slaves and employees are covered by what Peter is saying here.

Just as an aside, if you want to get a better feel for what a word is actually trying to bring across in the Greek it's often quite helpful to look at the King James Version, either the old or the new. They may not be the easiest to read but that wasn't there aim – rather than we looking at translating the Greek in a way that carried the same meaning as the Greek.

So What is Required of Us?

Peter tells that we must accept the authority of our masters, or in our modern context, our employers and that we must treat them with all respect. Probably for most of us, Yeah Right, immediately jumps to mind. Peter further goes on to say that we must do this not only when they are being kind and reasonable, but even when they are being cruel. For he says, God is pleased with you when you do what you know is right and patiently endure unfair treatment.

So is this how you would react to an unfair, even cruel, employer? I think for most of us (and I include myself) the answer is no.

What Peter is Not Saying:

One of the things we need to be very clear about is what Peter is not saying when he tells us to respect the authority of our employers.

1. He is not telling us obey our employers if what they are commanding goes directly against the command of God. This is relatively easy to prove from Scripture and comes from the life of Peter himself. When Peter and the apostles were arrested and brought before the Jewish high council and asked why they were still teaching about Jesus even though they had been explicitly told not to by the Jewish Council what was their reply:

29 But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." (Acts 5:29)

If it is a choice between obeying God and obeying man the decision is easy – we obey God.

2. He is not telling us to obey our employers if what they are commanding goes directly against the law of the land. This one is a little bit harder to prove. One of the questions we need to ask is what is authority and how is it gained? What gives someone the right to tell someone else what to do? How do we know when a person has overstepped their authority?

I think the best way of looking at this from a biblical perspective is to see authority in terms of a persons' relationship to us.

Relationship → Responsibility → Authority



In the parent/child relationship it is the responsibility that the parent has towards the child that gives the parent the authority over the child. As the child grows, the relationship between the parent and the child changes and with the change, the responsibility the parent has changes and therefore the authority they have over the child changes. It's not something we normally think too much about – it tends to just happen naturally.

In the employer/employee relationship the employer is the one providing the job because he cannot do all the tasks that need doing himself. Therefore he hires people to do those tasks for him and as such can expect those people to do the task he has employed them for. But he is now in relationship to them whether he likes it or not, and has become responsible for their well being, even if indirectly. If he pays them very little they will have a lower quality of life, even he pays them more they will have a higher quality of life (assuming the employee is actually capable of managing their money...). He can make the work place somewhere they enjoy being, or he can make it hell. He can provide them with the equipment they need to perform the job or he can give them substandard equipment. It is his choice. He can choose how he uses the profits the company makes. If he does nothing illegal then he does not have to answer to the government. However, he still has to answer to God.

In the government or other authority body we the people elect a group of people to do that which we cannot do – to run the country and establish laws which will be just and which will look after the poor, the widows and the helpless. Their authority comes to them not because of who they are (they are just like us), but because of their responsibility to us and their relationship to us. If they fail to do their job then they lose the authority. And ultimately they are answerable to God who judges justly every time so they are accountable. They are serving God, whether they like it or not and whether they acknowledge it or not.

This is partly why the Bible doesn't come out in favour of any particular form of government, or even against the owning of slaves for that matter. How we treat other people and how we exercise the authority we have been given over them, whether as king, employer, slave owner or parent is ultimately given to us by God and it is to him we are accountable. If the person in authority is following God's law, whether he or she is aware of that or not, is doing good and if not, then they are doing evil. That doesn't mean there are not practical reasons for particular forms of government, but ultimately the form of the government is not what keeps the people safe. One only need to look at the Roman empire or the current USA to see that.

So if our employer asks to do something which is against the law of the land we can rightly refuse because the government has a greater authority than the employer. The employer is in relationship to the government, the government is there to ensure that he doesn't do anything illegal as much as the employee. So we always obey the person with the highest authority.

That doesn't necessarily make our lives easier, but at least we now have some very good principles to work on when figuring out particular circumstances.

What It Is:



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OK. So if we accept where authority comes from we now have a clearer understanding of where the boundaries are. So assuming that the employer is not asking us to disobey God and he is not asking us to disobey the law of the land how should we respond to him? This is exactly the question this passage is here for. As Christians we should do everything our employer asks to do (within the defined boundaries) diligently so as to please God even if the employer is cruel. How he treats us should not determine how we do our work. We are responsible for our behaviour and our actions before God, he is responsible for his. His sin does not give us the right to sin ourselves. In fact this is a general principle we can apply to all of life – we should not let someone else's behaviour influence how we behave. So Peter's injunctions to us at the beginning of Chapter 2 still stand even in these circumstances.

1 So get rid of all evil behaviour. Be done with all deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech. (1 Peter 2:1)

So this is why Peter says that we must accept the authority of our employers with all respect.

Motivation:

The reason for doing this is that in doing so we are following Christ's example.

22 He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. 23 He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. (1 Peter 2:22-23)

Christ respected everyone and loved his Christian brothers and sisters. Despite the fact that he was God he never misused his authority. He respected the local authorities – he paid his taxes (Matthew 17:24-27). There is nowhere in the Scriptures you find him verbally or physically attacking the Roman authorities. As a man he was a Jew and under Roman rule and he accepted it. The Jewish religious leaders however was a different matter – as a man he was still the Messiah and such had the authority to berate them and to clear his Father's house of those abusing it, which he did, sometimes in no uncertain terms. (Matthew 21:12-13, John 2:1-22, Matthew 23)

Christ is to be our example. If he could do it, then we should try to live up to the example he left. We are still sinners so we are not going to get it right every time. But that is what we should be aiming for. We are called to do good even if it means suffering for it.

It is interesting that Peter feels compelled to add more. Christ is not just our example. He is our Saviour – by his wounds we are healed. He carried our sins in his body so that we might be dead to sin and live to what is right.

In Practise:

So how does this work out for us in practise?

1. If we have an employer that does not treat us well is it OK to look for another job? Yes. He does not own you, you are free to find another place of work. In fact for your own well being it is advantageous that you do so. But while you are looking you still need to do your current job to the best of your ability.
2. If I think my employer is making a wrong choice should I still do what he asks? Yes, I'm



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afraid so. That does not mean that you cannot talk to him and try to show him why you think the decision he is making is wrong, but if that fails then, providing it falls within the boundaries discussed above, you need to do it and do it to the best of your ability. He has employed you to do a particular job and how it wants it done is really up to him. He may understand more of the bigger picture than yourself, or he may be making a mistake. Either way it is his business and his choice how it gets run.

3. I have more than one boss and they all tell me to do different things. What should I do? This is a hard one. Basically you are in a no win situation. This is a situation in which this passage is probably very relevant. From a practical point of view try to get people to give you the jobs they want doing in writing so that you have a record of why you are doing a particular job. Then do it to the best of your ability. And when the proverbial hits the fan remember that God is your witness that you have done the best that you can in a difficult situation and he will commend you. Although it may feel like it the criticism and flack you receive is not actually a reflection on you, it's actually a reflection on them. If God commends you for the work you have done, why should you worry about what someone else thinks about how you do your job? Easy to say I know, very hard to put into practice.
4. My work situation has become very bad and it has reached the stage I think I need to get a mediator/lawyer/trade union representative involved. As a Christian is that the right thing for me to do? Yes, under one proviso – have you tried all other means of reaching an agreement first? For example, does the company have an HR department and have you spoken to them? If there is no HR department is there someone in senior management you can approach to mediate before getting someone externally involved.
5. I am an employer and the person I have employed does not do his job properly. Is it OK for me as a Christian to fire him? Yes – provided you go through all the legal steps required and the reason for them not doing the job is laziness. If the reason they cannot do their job is medical or physical then you may still have to fire them but you would need to think and pray through what you do much more carefully. If they still want to work but cannot do the job you employed them for is there possibly another job you could move them into, even if on reduced pay. If not, is there another way you could help them and their family until they find another job?

Essentially the law is there to protect us as both employer and employee. It is the higher authority to which we can appeal if things do wrong. There is nothing wrong with doing this – this is why God has put in place the authorities over us. This is why the Roman passage explicitly states:

1 Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. (Romans 13:1)

Conclusion:

So then, as we go out into the week to our respective work places remember that we go as children of God. Our focus should not be on pleasing our employer, but rather on pleasing Christ, independent of what our employer is like. If we do our work diligently even when our employer is not watching us, God will still see us and be pleased. And if do our work diligently even when our employer is unfair and even cruel, God will reward us.

