

## 2:18-25—SERVING LIKE THE SHEPHERD

### The Text (NRSV)

<sup>18</sup>Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. <sup>19</sup>For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup>If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. <sup>21</sup>For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

<sup>22</sup>He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup>When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. <sup>24</sup>He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup>For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

### What's going on here?

-v.18-21—This new section picks up with the continued theme of Christian submission first laid out in 2:13-17. Really, this whole section from 2:13-3:22 flows out of the direction in 2:11-12 to live distinctively in the midst of the world, so that even as believers are abused by the world, their actions and way of life will witness to God. We saw in 2:13-17 how our author directed **all** Christians to love and to honor *all* people, and then how that was to be applied even to the governing authorities. And by connecting that command to submit (NRSV reads “accept the authority of,” but “submitting yourselves to” would be closer to the Greek) with the Christian call both to love and honor all people and to love and fear God, 1 Peter actually undercut all the divine claims to power that the empire made.

Here in 2:18ff, the same theme of Christians' call to submit out of honor to everyone is developed further, this time specifically in the context of household slaves. Our author specifically addresses slaves in such detail not because the early church was *only* comprised of servants and slaves (Ephesians and Colossians, which were also written to this same geographic area in the same basic time frame, address both slaves *and* their masters). Rather, this direction to Christian slaves is emphasized because in some sense, 1 Peter

sees it as a model for all Christian life, for those free as well as those who are slaves. In fact, just in 2:16, he referred to all believers as “slaves of God,” who were at the same time free with regard to the world's claims on them. And yet the way Christians are called to use their freedom is always in service to the other. So this section really addresses two groups: those who are actual slaves in the original audience, *and* the entire Christian community, free and slave alike, who are called to embody the same willingness to submit in their own relationships.

It is worth noting that for 1 Peter, this is not a treatise on the morality of slavery *per se*, nor was slavery in the Greco-Roman world the matter of race it became in the United States through the 19th century (see Page 2 for a look at slavery in this 1st-century Mediterranean context). Despite the attempts of interpreters in the past to use passages like this to legitimate the practice of slavery, in fact, 1 Peter seems to be subverting the whole system of slavery even while refusing to violently overturn it. Rather, just as Christians submission to the emperor called into question the claims of the empire (and would “silence the ignorance of the foolish” as in 2:15), so submission even to unjust masters would call attention to the injustice of their treatment and the *illegitimacy* of the system. For 1 Peter, this is not a question of whether

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### LOOKING FOR MORE?

*Other NT authors speak to slaves and slavery also:*

- **Galatians 3:28**—Paul asserts that in the Christian community, the old boundaries between slave and free no longer apply. **All are one in Christ.**
- **Philemon**—This whole letter is a plea to a master to receive a runaway slave with love and implicitly to release the slave Onesimus and receive him as a brother in faith.
- **Ephesians 6:5-8 and Colossians 3:22-25**—Slaves are told to obey their masters as an expression of their devotion to Christ.

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slavery is morally justifiable for all people—Christians at this time were not in a position to overturn the whole system anyway. Rather, for 1 Peter, this is much more about how Christians embody the life and witness of Jesus Christ, who submitted and suffered as well. Peter’s argument is not that slaves should submit to their masters because they have a rightful claim to own and control slaves, but rather because Christ himself suffered and refused to retaliate when placed in a similar situation. And that actually undercuts and subverts the claims of masters in the slave-system of the day—Christian slaves will submit not because they concede that they are property of their masters, but because they recognize their primary allegiance to God.

-v.22-25—The call to submit to masters (which in some sense is a model for all Christians’ relationships, not just slaves) is ultimately grounded in the story and example of the church’s own master and Lord, Jesus Christ, who, as

Paul would say, took “the form of a slave” (Phil. 2:7). Our author makes a similar point—Jesus refused to retaliate in the face of suffering and abuse, and instead bore that injustice, along with all human sin, on the cross. In these verses, he draws heavily from Isaiah 53 and reads the poetry of the “suffering servant” through the lens of Jesus’ own suffering and death.

One final important point about the suffering of Christians in connection with Christ’s own suffering: Christians’ own submission and suffering is *not* viewed as something believers do to *earn* their status as members of the church or the people of God. Rather, for 1 Peter, they are already the “precious” and “chosen” people of God, whose sins are already dealt with in Christ. It is only in response to that—because of their identity as the people of God in Christ—that believers are called to suffer. Because they are already claimed by Christ, they are called to be shaped ever more fully into his likeness, and that will include enduring suffering and submitting even in the face of injustice.

**SIDEBAR—SLAVERY IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD**

Because of the tremendous impact that African slavery had on American history, it is very difficult to read New Testament passages about slavery without seeing it through the lens of American race-relations. And while it is important to make the connection from Biblical materials to the events of our own age, it is important to recognize the differences between slavery in the ancient world and in the Americas.

On the one hand, slavery in both the 1st and the 18th-19th centuries AD were often cruel and oppressive for slaves. There is no denying this; slaves were regarded as property rather than human by many, and their legal rights were few and rarely upheld. Violence against slaves was clearly and tragically a part of both eras at times, as well. However, slavery in the Greco-Roman world did not have the same racial overtones it came to have in the United States. While it was true that peoples and nations who were conquered by the Romans were often forced into slavery, there were

also slaves who had sold themselves into servitude as payment for debts. And in fact, there was the potential in the ancient world for slaves to have a more secure livelihood than freed persons, even to be considered a part of the household of the master, whereas American slavery used race as a boundary permanently keeping black slaves from belonging, even when they were not treated with excessive harshness. None of these excuses or legitimates slavery in the ancient world, but it is important to recognize that the slavery of the 1st century is not the same as the African American slavery of the 19th century. But all too often, passages like this one in 1 Peter have been used to excuse slavery and especially to grant permission to racism along black and white lines. Rather, it is important to uplift the clear witness of the New Testament that *within* the church, there was to be no distinction between slave and free (Gal. 3:28) and *outside* the church, slaves were to model the suffering love of Christ (as were all Christians) and to call attention to injustice through love.

**CONNECTIONS—FREED TO SERVE?**

- ❖ In a culture that often prizes self-determination and independence, teaching about submission and suffering at the will of others can sound backward and oppressive. Do these words from the 1st century still speak to us today? How?
- ❖ How can Christians today adopt a posture of life that follows the servant-like model of Jesus in a society without slaves and servants? What does service look like for us?
- ❖ Does the call to submit to masters mean something different depending on who says it? For example, if a slave master says that “God wants you to submit,” does it have the same effect and force as when a fellow slave says, “We should submit out of service to God”? From which perspective is 1 Peter writing?
- ❖ Even though it has been abolished, what effects of slavery remain in American society? How might we be called to address those lingering effects?

### 3:1-7—SPOUSES AND SELF-SURRENDER

#### The Text (NRSV)

*Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, <sup>2</sup>when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. <sup>3</sup>Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; <sup>4</sup>rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight. <sup>5</sup>It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. <sup>6</sup>Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you. <sup>7</sup>Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.*

#### What's going on here?

If the previous section on conduct for slaves was difficult for us to read as 21st-century people, this next section on relations between husbands and wives is probably even more difficult to swallow. After all, we no longer have the question of slavery to deal with, but gender relations are still very much with us and have very much changed over the years. But before we roll our progressive, enlightened eyes at this text for being backward and oppressive, a few words need to be said about context, and a few themes need to be highlighted that might be easily skipped over in our modern reading.

First of all, this section, like the previous one, really fits under the larger heading of Christian love and honor for *all* people shown through the enduring of suffering. And much as 2:18ff was not a treatise on the morality of slavery but direction for Christians who find themselves already within a system of slavery, 3:1ff addresses the context of women already within a cultural system. And much as 2:13-17 actually *subverted* the order of the day by calling for honor of the emperor just as one would honor *any* human being, the same logic applies here. Wives are called to testify and witness to the alternative way of life that is the Christian community by their selfless love for husbands. Furthermore, much as the direction given to Christian slaves was in some sense a template for *all* Christian action, so the direction to wives is in some sense a call to men and women alike to have a selfless, surrendering love for others.

If anything, 1 Peter would tell Christian men to live with the deference and submission that Greco-Roman society expected only of women. In other words, 1 Peter seems to see the way of life of slaves and women (the people at the bottom in 1st century culture) as a paradigm for all Christians.

Also important to consider are two issues of historical and cultural context in this passage. First, 1 Peter seems to be focusing on the situation of women married to unbelieving husbands (see 3:1). This puts the conversation into a different light. The earliest Christian tradition was one of *radical* equality between men and women within the church. Paul in Galatians 3:28 says that the old lines dividing male and female no longer hold for the Christian community, and clearly he is aware of (and even commends) women who are in leadership positions in the church (see for example, Euodia and Syntyche in Phil. 4:2-3, Prisca, short for Priscilla, in Romans 16:3, and Junia, named an *apostle* in Rom. 16:7). 1 Corinthians 7 also depicts a radically *equal* and *self-giving* pattern for spouses. But the church had to struggle with how to deal with spouses who were not a part of the church—1 Cor. 7:12ff, for example, holds out the possibility of the Christian partner leading the spouse into faith. 1 Peter makes a similar move; women who are believers may lead non-believing spouses to faith by their acts of selfless love. They point to an alternative way of being human, counter to the games of power and domination so often played between the sexes, that responds always in selfless love. It is important to read this whole passage in light of the emphasis on wives who witness to their non-believing husbands through their self-surrendering love.

A second cultural note is how the church of the late first-century, of which this letter is a part, dealt with the increasing hostility it felt from the surrounding culture. The early church came to be accused of attacking the institution of the family and of being a threat to the social order (which in a sense, it was—but not in an anarchist or libertine sort of way). Part of how the church responded was to stress all the ways it was in continuity with the culture around it—for the sake of the church's own survival. So at some point, the early church backed away from the radically counter-cultural language of its earliest writings and settled in for the long haul in relating to the outside world. 1 Peter wants to emphasize here how Christians are not a threat to the institution of the family. We still need to ask today how much accommodation with our surrounding culture is appropriate and at what point accommodation means losing something definitive about our faith. 1 Peter, too, is attempting to keep the Christian community in relationship with

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the culture around it. And as culture changes, we will have to ask the same questions of how best to live in the midst of a world that may or may not reflect the radical equality, fidelity, and self-giving that characterizes relationships within the people of God.

The directions about self-adornment need to be understood in this context as well. Again, since this section seems to be first directed to women whose husbands are non-believers, this passage speaks to how they witness to their faith. And 1 Peter's point is that their most powerful tool of persuasion is not physical appearance, as though they could seduce their own husbands into faith, but through their radical, selfless love.

Muddying up the waters again is 3:6, which uses Sarah and Abraham as an example of this submissive love between spouses. The reference is to a single instance in Genesis 18:12, where Sarah refers to Abraham as her "lord" (although the word can be translated as "husband" as the NRSV in fact does in that passage). What is interesting to note—and granted, our author does not push this point—is that only *Sarah's* behavior is commended. Nowhere are women or men advised to accept a placement of superiority over their spouses—rather, wives and husbands alike are named as "heirs of the gracious gift of life." Only the position of submissive selfless love for the other is commended as an example. In fact, 1 Peter seems to go as far as to say that a failure on the part of men to treat their wives as equal "heirs" will hinder their own relationship and communication with God in prayer.

The reference to women as the "weaker vessel" (again, the NRSV does its best with "weaker sex") also needs to be addressed. On the one hand, yes, our author may have in mind the conventional assumption of 1st century Greco-Roman society that women were generally weaker physically (and some writers also said intellectually as well). By

accepting this assumption, does our author then lose the radical equality that is preserved in letters like Galatians? This is a tough question. Two things preserve at least some of that radical vision, though. For one, it is clear that our author sees men and women *alike* as equal heirs before God in the community of faith. This is non-negotiable for 1 Peter.

Second, but again implicit (so take my interpretation with a grain of salt) is the way our author has referred to those in the lower or "weaker" stations in his society thus far. Christians are to *identify* with the exiles, the slaves, the foreigners, and yes with the poorly-treated wives of their day. To identify with them as "weak" is not to condone or legitimate the structures that name them "weak" but to say that in a world that labels some as "strong" and some as "weak," some as "haves" and some as "have-nots," Christians will always share something in common with the latter. Just as our author does not condone the practice of slavery, but sees in the submission of slaves a model for how *all* Christians should live toward others, so he may see the way women are treated in society as a metaphor for the way Christians will be treated in society when they are being faithful. In some sense, 1 Peter has already called his readers to identify themselves with the things and persons labeled as "weaker vessels" by the world. One wonders if some of the same strands of thought that inform Paul's teaching on how God chooses what is "weak to shame the strong" and what is "foolish to shame the wise" (1 Cor. 1) are underneath this passage, too. Again, it is not certain that this passage is going there, but it does seem at least plausible that in calling women the "weaker vessel," our author is in fact pointing to them as in some ways a better paradigm or model for Christian life than the way that men are regarded as "stronger" in the society of the day.

**CONNECTIONS—LIFTING UP THE LOWLY**

- ❖ Thus far, 1 Peter has uplifted the lowly ones of his day as examples and called Christians to identify with them. With whom might we be called to identify today? What does it look like to identify with someone? How are we called to serve others and to come to the aid of others in need? What things might we be called to submit to today?