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WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR BOSS ISN'T FAIR

1 Peter 2:18-23

by

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1 Peter Lesson 12

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR BOSS ISN'T FAIR 1 Peter 2:18-23

If you are a parent of children old enough to talk, you have heard them complain, "But that isn't fair!" And you responded, "Life isn't fair!" We are born with a strong inner sense of fairness and a strong desire to fight for our rights when we have been treated unfairly. Although we know that life isn't fair, we're prone to fight back when we're the victims of unfair treatment.

Let's assume that you are a conscientious worker on your job. You get to work early, you're careful not to extend your lunch breaks, and sometimes you stay late on your own time to finish a job. You're careful not to waste company time with excessive chit-chat. You work hard and produce for the company. Because you're a Christian, you don't go out drinking after hours with the boss and you don't swap the latest dirty jokes with him.

Another worker is, in your opinion, a goof off. He often comes in late, he spends a lot of time chatting with the secretaries, he takes long lunches, and he does sloppy work which you often have to correct. But he also goes out drinking with the boss and he always has a new dirty joke that sends the boss into hysterics. When a promotion opens up, he gets the better job and you are overlooked.

Life isn't fair! The important question is, "How do you respond when you're treated unfairly?" How should you respond? Is it wrong to defend yourself or to stand up for your rights? How should a Christian respond when treated unfairly, especially on the job? That is the question Peter addresses in 1 Peter 2:18-23. My guess is that you're not going to like his answer. (I can guess that because I don't like his answer either!) His answer is,

When treated unfairly by a superior, we should submissively endure by entrusting ourselves to God, the righteous Judge.

That principle is easily stated, but not so easily applied. Not one of the fifteen or so commentators I read dealt with the tough practical implications raised here. How broadly can we apply to modern life principles given to slaves? Do these things apply beyond the realm of employment to any situation? Is it always wrong to defend ourselves or to speak out when we are treated unfairly? Are Christians supposed to be doormats? If so, how do we harmonize this text with the numerous occasions where Jesus and Paul defended themselves and verbally attacked their accusers? These are some of the issues we must think through if we want to apply this text properly. I'm going to offer five statements to seek to explain and apply what Peter is saying. You'll have to struggle to apply it personally to your specific situation.

1. The situation for submission is one in which we are under authority.

Peter addresses this to "servants." The word refers to household servants, but these were not just domestic employees; they were slaves. They belonged as property to their owners. Immediately we cry out, "That's not fair! Slavery is evil! Slave owners are wrong! Slaves shouldn't have to submit to unjust authority! They should revolt!"

But that isn't the biblical approach to righting the social evil of slavery. The biblical approach was to exhort slave owners to treat their slaves with dignity and fairness. They were even to view them as brothers and sisters in the faith (e.g., Philemon). And slaves were exhorted to be good, submissive workers. If they had an opportunity to gain their freedom, fine (1 Cor. 7:21). Otherwise, they were to be good slaves, in submission to their owners. It wasn't a quick fix to the evil of slavery. It didn't result in a slave revolt, although eventually it did topple slavery. But in the meanwhile, it demonstrated Christlikeness within the existing social structure in a way that led to the spread of the gospel.

How do we apply this to our cultural situation? We aren't slaves to our employers, although we may feel like it at times. Is it wrong to defend ourselves and to stand up for our rights when they are violated by an employer? That's the American way, isn't it?

It may be the American way, but it's not necessarily the biblical way. God's way is for us to identify the nature of the relationship: Am I

under the authority of the person who is treating me unfairly? That is the first question I must ask to determine how I should act in a given situation.

God has ordained various spheres of authority. He is the supreme authority over all, of course. But under God there is the sphere of human government (1 Pet. 2:13-17; Rom. 13:1-7). Also, there is the sphere of the family, in which husbands have authority over wives (1 Pet. 3:1-6; Eph. 5:22-24) and parents over children (Eph. 6:1-4). There is the sphere of the church, in which elders have authority over the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-5; Heb. 13:17). And there is the sphere of employment (either forced, as in slavery, or voluntary), in which employees must be subject to employers (1 Pet. 2:18; Eph. 6:5-9).

Once we've identified whether or not we are under the authority of the person who is mistreating us, we then must examine our own attitude and motives and ask: Do I have a proper attitude of submission, or am I selfishly fighting for my rights? If I'm truly in submission and I'm not acting for selfish reasons, I would argue that there is a proper place for respectful communication that seeks to clarify falsehood and promote the truth. In other words, if our attitude and motives are in submission to God, we need not always silently endure unjust treatment as Christian doormats. There is a proper place for self-defense and for confronting the errors of those who have mistreated us, as long as we work through proper channels.

I make this point because many take the overly simplistic (and erroneous) view that Christians must always endure mistreatment in silence and that self-defense is always wrong. But Jesus Himself did not do this, nor did the Apostle Paul who wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For example, in John 8 the Jews attacked Jesus' character and authority by saying that He was bearing false witness about Himself and that He was illegitimately born. Jesus did not silently endure this attack. Rather, He defended Himself as being sent from the Father and He attacked these critics by saying that they were of their father, the devil! That's hardly a passive, silent response! Nor was Jesus passive when He attacked the Pharisees for their hypocrisy (Matthew 23). The Apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and parts of other epistles to defend his character and ministry which were under attack. He put down his critics in a strong and, at times, sarcastic manner.

How can we harmonize such vigorous self-defense with Peter's exhortation to silent submission? It seems to me that there are several factors to consider in deciding whether to defend myself or silently to bear reproach. First, Am I under the authority of the one attacking me? If so, I need to examine my life to see if I'm doing something to provoke the attack. If so, I deserve punishment (2:20). I may need to ask the person to help me with a blind spot. I may need to explain my motivation. If I conclude that the superior is simply out to get me because of my faith, I probably need to bear the unfair treatment patiently for Christ's sake.

A second question: Is God's truth being called into question or ridiculed? If so, I should clearly defend the truth. During Jesus' mockery of a trial before the Sanhedrin, He was silent until the high priest said, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus couldn't remain silent to that question, so He answered, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:63-64).

A third factor concerns our witness to outsiders. If I am being falsely attacked on the job, I need to ask myself how I can bear the most effective witness for Jesus Christ. It may be that a quiet but confident answer would be most effective. But if they've heard where I stand, it may be that quiet submission, where I let go of my rights, would be most effective. More on this in a moment.

The main principle is, am I under the authority of the person who is acting unfairly toward me? If I am, then I can appeal with the proper attitude of submission. But if the appeal fails, I must submit. Does that mean that I must remain under unjust authority for the rest of my life? Isn't there a place for getting out from under corrupt authority? The answer is, "Yes, but be careful!" There is a place for Christians to flee from a corrupt government. There is a time to get out from under corrupt spiritual authority (as in the Reformation). There is a time for moving from a bad employer. But if you move too quickly, you may miss what God is seeking to do in the difficult situation. He may want to teach you some hard lessons of being like Christ. He may want to bear witness through you. So weigh things carefully before you make a move.

If you are defiant or impulsive, you probably should stay put and learn to submit.

2. The motives for submission are to please God and bear witness to the lost.

A. The primary motive for submission is to please God.

When Peter says, "Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect," it should be translated, "with all fear." In the previous verse Peter distinguished between fearing God and honoring the king. So here, when he says that we should be submissive with all fear, he means, "fear toward God," not "fear toward the earthly master."

Also, twice (2:19a, 20b) Peter says that submitting to unjust treatment "finds favor with God." Peter's language here reflects the teaching of Jesus in Luke 6:32-35, which was no doubt in Peter's mind ("what credit" there is the same Greek word as "favor" here). The idea is that God gives grace (same Greek word as "credit" and "favor") to the humble, not to the defiant, assertive, and self-reliant. If we defy an authority which God has placed over us, we are, in effect, defying God Himself. Thus, conscious of God (probably the best translation of "conscience toward God" [2:19, NASB]), we should seek to submit to please Him, trusting Him to deal with the unjust authority.

One way to apply this is consciously to recognize that you don't work primarily for your employer; you work for God. Howard Hendricks tells the story of being on an airliner that was delayed on the ground. Passengers grew increasingly impatient. One obnoxious man kept venting his frustrations on the stewardess. But she responded graciously and courteously in spite of his abuse.

After they finally got airborne and things calmed down, Dr. Hendricks called the woman aside and said, "I want to get your name so that I can write a letter of commendation to your employer." He was surprised when she responded, "Thank you, sir, but I don't work for American Airlines." He sputtered, "You don't?" "No," she explained, "I work for my Lord Jesus Christ." She went on to explain that before each flight, she and her husband would pray together that she would be a good representative of Christ on her job. She sought to please God first.

- B. A secondary motive for submission is to bear witness to the lost.

The issue of a slave's response to his master had far-reaching cultural implications in that day when there were millions of slaves. If Christian slaves were defiant, critics could have accused Christianity of stirring up rebellion and undermining the whole fabric of the society. Thus the theme of our witness to a pagan world underlies this section (as it does the previous and following paragraphs also).

Christ suffered on our behalf (2:21). His unjust suffering (Peter uses this word instead of "death" to relate to his readers' suffering) secured our salvation in a substitutionary sense (as Peter goes on to make clear in 2:24). In a similar, but not totally analogous way, our unjust suffering can lead to the salvation of lost people if they see the character of Christ in us as we suffer. The attitude of fighting for our rights communicates to the world that we're living for the things of this world. Submitting to unfair treatment and giving up our rights communicates the truth, that we're living as pilgrims on our way to heaven.

If you're being treated unfairly at work, you may be looking at a tremendous opportunity to bear witness for Christ by your behavior. If you yield your rights in a Christlike manner, people will notice and may wonder, "Why doesn't he fight for his rights?" Maybe you'll get an opportunity to tell them. If so, your words are backed up by the powerful testimony of your good works. You have demonstrated what it means to live under God's authority, with a view to pleasing Him.

This raises the question of whether or not it is proper for Christians to belong to trade unions. That's a sensitive issue, and I don't have time to deal with it. I will say in passing that you need to think through whether you can bear witness of a Christlike spirit, in submission to God and to your employer, while belonging to an organization that seeks to fight for your rights.

Thus, the situation for submission is one in which we are under authority. The motives for submission are to please God and to bear witness.

3. The pattern for submission is Jesus Christ.

Christ left an example for us to follow in His steps (2:21). The word example is literally, “underwriting.” It was a school word. Teachers would lightly trace the letters of the alphabet so that students could write over them to learn how to write. Or, as in our day, teachers would put examples of the alphabet up in the room for students to look at to copy as they formed their letters. Christ is that kind of example for us. If we follow how He lived, we will form our lives correctly.

Following “in His steps” pictures a child who steps in his father’s footprints in the snow. Where the father goes, the child goes, because he puts his feet in those same footprints. In like manner, we are to follow our Savior. Peter says that we are called to the same purpose as Christ was (2:21). If our Master’s footprints led to the cross where He suffered unjustly, so we can expect to die to self and suffer unjustly. If we respond as He did, people will see our Savior in us. Many people will never read the Bible, but they do read our lives. They should see Christlikeness there, not a defiant spirit of self-will that characterizes those who are living for themselves and the things of this world.

4. The principle of submission involves not retaliating when we are wronged.

When Jesus was wronged, He did not retaliate in kind. He could have called legions of angels to strike down His enemies. He could have selfishly stood up for His rights (after all, He is Lord of the universe!). But He didn’t. He always acted selflessly, even when He did confront His accusers. While we’ll never be as unselfish as Jesus, it is a goal we should strive for.

Peter quotes (2:22-23) from Isaiah 53 to show how Jesus did not retaliate when He was wronged. There are four things mentioned which we need to keep in mind when we are treated unfairly. First, Jesus did not commit sin. He always acted in obedience to the Father, never in self-will. Second, there was never any deceit in His mouth. He didn’t bend the facts to win the argument or get His own way. When He defended Himself, He was always truthful. Third, when He was reviled, He didn’t revile in return. He didn’t trade insults. Fourth, He uttered

no threats. He didn't say, "Just you wait! I'll get even with you!" In other words, Jesus didn't respond to verbal abuse with more verbal abuse. Neither should we. Vengeance is always wrong for the Christian (Rom. 12:19).

How can we possibly live this way? Peter gives the answer in the final clause of 2:23:

5. The means of submission is to entrust ourselves to the Righteous Judge.

Jesus made it through the cross by continually entrusting Himself to the Father who judges righteously. He knew that He would be vindicated by being raised from the dead and enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty on high. He knew that His persecutors would be judged and dealt with according to their sins. So He "delivered Himself up" (the literal translation of "entrusted") to God. It is the same word used for Jesus being delivered up to Pilate by the Jews and to the soldiers by Pilate (John 19:11, 16). They delivered Him up to death, but He delivered Himself up for our sins, trusting in the Father.

Jesus entrusted Himself to the Father, knowing that even though the way led to the cross, it also led through the cross to the glory beyond. Even so, we can entrust ourselves to God. The way will lead to the cross; but also, it will lead through the cross to the glory that awaits us in heaven. God is the righteous Judge who will someday right every wrong and bring vengeance on those who resist His authority. Our task is to trust Him by submitting to human authority, even when we are treated unfairly.

Conclusion

Bill Gothard tells the story of a Christian boy who had a hostile, unbelieving father. The boy asked if he could attend the church prayer meeting one evening and the father reluctantly gave permission. As the boy walked home after the prayer meeting, a friend saw him and offered him a lift in his car. The father saw his son get out of the friend's car and said, "You lied to me about going to the prayer meeting! You really went out with your friends. I'm going to whip you for that!" The boy

replied, "No, I went to the prayer meeting." The father exploded, "I'm going to give you a double whipping for lying about it."

The boy quietly endured the beating and didn't grow bitter toward his father. He loved his dad and wanted to see him trust in Christ. A few days later the father was in the hardware store and ran into the pastor of the church where his son attended. Not knowing about the whipping, the pastor said, "You sure have a fine son. Last week in prayer meeting, he blessed us all with a fine word of testimony." The father asked, "Was my boy in prayer meeting last week? I thought he went out with his friends." The father was broken and soon came to Christ.

The great goal of the Christian life is to be like Jesus. That sounds wonderful until we realize that being like Jesus means submitting to proper authority, even if it's unjust. It means submitting to please God and to bear witness to the lost. It means following Christ's example, even as He went to the cross. It means not retaliating when we're wronged. It means entrusting ourselves to the Righteous Judge, knowing that someday He will right all the wrongs.

These are not easy things for any of us to apply. But consider the rebellious spirit of our age and of our country and ask yourself if you are behaving properly toward those in authority over you, especially at work. Our response to unfair treatment should be submission, not fighting for our rights. If we put our trust in God, He will look out for us and right all the wrongs. It's true: life isn't fair! But thank God that Jesus endured unfair treatment on our behalf by bearing our sins so that we could receive eternal life!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does God allow unjust authority to go on?
2. How can we know when it's proper to defend ourselves and when we should bear injustice without defense?
3. Was Paul wrong to stand up to corrupt authority in Acts 16:35-40? Why/why not?
4. How can we know whether it's permissible to move out from under corrupt authority?
5. Are trade unions opposed to the principle of submission to employers? Why/why not?

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