

1 Peter 2:18-25 (Part I)

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago, we saw that it's *as* sojourners and foreigners in this world that we are to live good—and holy—lives before the world. Even as strangers to this world, we're still to live and function in this world in a way that will ultimately be a reason for all the world to give glory to God – to confess and acknowledge His perfect righteousness and justice. So how do we do this? What are these “good”—*and holy!*—lives that we're to live before the world? We saw last week that Peter sums up the answer in one word. We are to **submit** ourselves – or place ourselves willingly under the authorities in our lives. So, in verse 13 Peter says: “**Submit** yourselves to every human creature”; in verse 18 he says, “Household slaves, **submit** yourselves to your master”; and in the first verse of chapter three he says, “Wives, **submit** yourselves to your husband.” This morning, we're just going to introduce the second of these three sections.

1 Peter 2:18 — Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all [reverent] fear, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.

I. Slavery, Liberation Theology, and the Social Justice “Gospel”

First of all, what in the world is Peter doing even talking about slavery? Why isn't he railing against slavery? Why isn't he calling for the abolition of slavery? Why is he, on the contrary, commanding slaves to submit themselves to their masters – even to unjust masters?

On the one hand, these are hard words for anyone because they go against every single natural—or fleshly—instinct that we have. These are hard words for everyone, but in our day they should be especially hard for a certain huge section of the professing church. Why is this? Well, today there's a certain kind of popular theology known as “liberation theology.” It's a specific way of reading the Bible with a specific system of belief that then arises out of that reading of the Bible. So it's called a theology of liberation—of freedom; and that sounds wonderful and good, doesn't it? But the question is: freedom from what? What liberation theology has in mind is freedom from unjust practices and unjust treatment in our society. (I'm assuming, here, practices that really are biblically unjust.) Now we can wholeheartedly agree that it's a good thing when people are not oppressed and taken advantage of and treated unjustly. That's something to be glad about. It's not this idea that's the problem, it's the theology.

So, what this liberation theology does, is it gives birth in turn to a particular kind of “Gospel” – the “social justice Gospel.” What is the “Gospel” that much of the professing church is preaching to the world today? It's this: “God is working to set you free from injustice and oppression, from hurt and suffering; the Gospel is all about how God in Christ and through His church is working to destroy all injustice and oppression in the world and make you truly ‘free.’” For many, this is a message that resonates. It's a message that's heady and intoxicating. It's inspiring whole masses of young people. Both liberation theology and the social justice “Gospel” that it gives birth to are sweeping the professing church today. (Reformed Churches with their “New Calvinism” are no exception.) But sadly, in the end, there's no real love or compassion in this theology; there's no real good news in this so-called “Gospel.”

What we want to know is, why does Peter tell slaves to submit themselves to unjust masters? How does this fit with liberation theology? How can this fit with the true Gospel? Is Peter just catering to the oppressive power structures of his day [slave-owners] at the expense of slaves – who were the most vulnerable and defenseless members of society? And if he’s not, then what in the world *is* Peter doing?

II. Slavery, the Bible, and the True Gospel

There’s a lot that could be said about what slavery was in the time of Peter, but the main point I want to emphasize is that a slave—as long as he was a slave—was, in a *legal* sense, the “property” of his “owner.” (cf. Lev. 25:44-46) This doesn’t **necessarily** mean that the law defined the slave as mere chattel and not an actual human being. What it does mean is that while the master provided room and board for the slave as a part of his household, that slave’s lot in all of his life was to serve his master and obey his wishes – with or without any pay or remuneration. The slave-master relationship was not in any way equivalent to today’s employee-employer relationship. So, as a result of how the institution of slavery was set up, the slaves were in all cases at the mercy of their masters. There might be truly “good and gentle” masters. And there might also be harsh and “unjust” masters.

So the first question we need to ask is this: Was a slave, in Peter’s day, by definition being treated unjustly – simply because he was a slave? (cf. Jobes) If so, then we have a problem in Scripture, because when the Scriptures speak to Christian slave-owners, they never tell them to give their slaves their freedom, but rather to treat their slaves with gentleness and with justice. (cf. Philemon 15-16)

- Ephesians 6:9 — Masters... stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.
- Colossians 4:1 — Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Paul even says in 1 Timothy chapter six:

- 1 Timothy 6:2 — Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.

It’s true that the institution of slavery would not have existed anywhere in the world if it had not been for the fall and the entrance of sin into this world. But in this fallen world, the Bible recognizes that there are institutions that are not at all the ideal, and yet what the church is to reject is not *necessarily* the institution itself, but rather any form of injustice within that institution. The question for Paul was not whether a Christian could have slaves, it was simply assumed that he could given the realities of that day. The question for Paul was whether the Christian masters were treating their household slaves with true gentleness and fairness. In the same way, Peter simply assumes slavery as a social reality in his day.

We read these verses, and we're immediately amazed at how the authority structure in slavery is treated in the same context as the authority structure in marriage. But for Peter, the question of which one was ordained by God before the fall and which one is actually only a sad result of the fall has no bearing whatsoever on the question of submission. In Peter's day, to simply live in the world was to find oneself under the authority of the Emperor and his appointed governors, and also, depending on who you were, under the authority of a master or under the authority of a husband.

And so what Peter wants us to see is not how we're promised an escape from these different authorities, but rather how we're to live faithfully within these different contexts in this fallen world in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So how do slaves live faithfully within their context of slavery? By submitting themselves faithfully to their masters – even to unjust masters. Can you see that for liberation theology and the social justice Gospel this can't possibly be good news? And yet Peter believes that his command to submit *is* truly an expression of the good news of Jesus Christ. So how in the world can this be? Well, the first thing we need to see is what's biblically wrong with the social justice "Gospel" and that means seeing first of all what's biblically wrong with liberation theology. That's what we'll look at this week.

III. Liberation Theology, Social Justice, and the Old Covenant

Liberation theology is based on a reading of the Old Testament and the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that sounds to many people like it's solid and good, but in fact it's a reading of the Bible that ignores completely its covenant context. Now any reading of the Bible that ignores its covenantal context is not actually reading the Bible at all – because the Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, *is* covenant.

This covenantal context of the Bible affects our interpretation of the Bible in numerous and huge ways. For one thing, it means that the emphasis on "social justice" in the Old Testament is an emphasis on social justice in the context of the covenant people under their covenant king who rules over them under their covenant God.

- Psalm 132:13–18 — The LORD has chosen **Zion**; he has desired it for his dwelling place: "This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will satisfy **her poor** with bread. Her **priests** I will clothe with salvation, and her **saints** will shout for joy. There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed."
- Psalm 72:1–4 — Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! May he judge **your people** with righteousness, and **your poor** [covenant community] with justice! Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness! May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor!

AS a chosen race, **AS** a royal priesthood, **AS** a holy nation and people of God's own special possession, **ISRAEL** was to be a "society" of people where justice and righteousness prevailed in all of its relationships and at every level of its society.

- Deuteronomy 23:19–20 (cf. Lev. 25:39-46) — You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother [covenant community]... You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest.
- Exodus 23:6, 11 — Your poor... the poor of your people...
- Deuteronomy 15:7, 11 — One of your brothers... your poor brother... You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.
- Isaiah 3:14–15 (cf. Exod. 23:6, 11; Deut. 15:7, 11) — The LORD will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of **his people**: “It is you who have devoured the vineyard, **the spoil of the poor** is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing **my people** [Covenant Community], by grinding **the face of the poor**?” declares the Lord GOD of hosts.
- Isaiah 10:1–2 — Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob **the poor of my people** [covenant community] of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!

One of the really important themes we’ve already begun to see in these verses is that the poor in the Old Testament are often associated with those who are truly righteous and obedient to God’s law.

- Psalm 14:5–6 — God is with the generation of the **righteous**. You would shame the plans of the **poor**, but the LORD is his refuge.
- Psalm 34:6–7 (cf. 9:17-18) — This **poor** man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around **those who fear him**, and delivers them.
- Psalm 37:14 (cf. 146:5-10) — The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the **poor** and needy, to slay those whose way is **upright**.

It’s clear that the Old Testament emphasis on “social justice” cannot possibly be rightly understood or applied without a thorough understanding of the important context of the **covenant** and the **covenant community**. Liberation theology exalts the social justice but utterly ignores the covenant context – which, we’ll see, leads to a counterfeit “gospel.”

Now, this isn’t to say that God didn’t care about justice and righteousness in the Gentile nations like the Philistines and the Egyptians and the Moabites and the Ammonites. God does care about this, and He always will because He is the just and righteous ruler and judge of the universe.

- Ezekiel 16:49 (cf. Jer. 49:10-11) — Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.

But Israel, as the covenant people, was never called to accomplish the end of all oppression in Sodom or in Egypt or anywhere else, but rather to **be that holy** “society” on earth where true righteousness and justice could be found. (cf. Isa. 16:3-4; Jer. 49:10-11; 1 Kings 8:41-43; the constant emphasis in Deuteronomy on the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19-21; 26:12-13; 27:19) You see, Israel was God’s redeemed people, and because of this good news of Israel’s redemption and because of the good news of the blood of

the covenant, and therefore because of their grateful obedience to God's laws (their keeping of His covenant), the **RESULT** of all this would be holiness and righteousness at every level of society – at every level of the covenant community. But because Israel sinned and worshiped idols and broke the covenant, the result of this was a society full of every kind of oppression and injustice. (cf. Amos and many of the prophets) **So, in light of this, what should we conclude is the key to a society where true righteousness and justice will prevail at every level and in every relationship? This can only happen in a covenant community that's been redeemed not just from Egypt, but from its own sin.** This can only happen in a covenant community where the blood of the covenant is actually powerful to forgive sins and turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh and enable us to be worshipers of the one true God and keepers of His covenant and lovers of His laws.

IV. Liberation Theology, Social Justice, and the New Covenant

So in the Old Testament, when the prophets foretold a coming day of “social justice” (as they certainly did), this was really just the promise of the New Covenant. It was nothing more and nothing less than the promise of a **forgiven** and **transformed new covenant people**. It was the Gospel of justification by faith alone in the substitutionary blood sacrifice of Christ alone that was going to **produce** a new society of people where all relationships were characterized by true holiness. And what is this society of people called today? It's called the church.*

As a chosen race, *as* a royal priesthood, *as* a holy nation and people for God's own possession ransomed by the precious blood of Christ, *we* are now a “society” of people where justice and righteousness can successfully prevail in all of our relationships. So with this in mind, whenever the Old Testament promises a universal, worldwide society characterized by “social justice,” what must it be assuming? (cf. Isa. 11:1-9; 65:17-25) It can only be assuming the day when all the wicked have been judged and destroyed by God, and when God's chosen, covenant people have all been perfected and glorified and fill all the earth, living under the eternal rule of Jesus Christ.

Are you seeing how the true Gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ alone has already created this new covenant community where our relationships with one another can truly be characterized by righteousness and justice and love? (cf. 2 Cor. 8-9)

- Acts 2:42–47 (cf. 4:32-37) — They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And **all who believed** were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all [who believed], as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.
- Acts 6:1–4 — Now in these days when **the disciples** were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of

* Cf. The pervasive emphasis within the NT on love and “one-anothering” within the body of Christ

wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

- Hebrews 13:1–3 (cf. 10:32–34) — Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers [traveling Christians], for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those [Christians] who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.
- Hebrews 10:32–34 — Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.
- 1 John 3:16–18 — By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees **his brother** in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.
- James 1:27 — Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans [the fatherless] and widows in their affliction [**covenant community**], and to keep oneself unstained from the **world**.

Just like in the Old Testament, so also in the New Testament the poor and oppressed are often assumed to be those who are holy and obedient. (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–29) In Matthew, it’s the humble and repentant sinners who are described as the “poor in spirit.” (Mat. 5:3–4; cf. Isa. 61:1–4; note the emphasis, once again, on the redeemed covenant community) In James, it’s the poor that God has chosen to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love Him (James 2:1–5; 1:9), while the rich are those who blaspheme Jesus’ name and oppress the disciples and drag them into court. (James 2:6–7; 1:10–11; 5:1–8) In Timothy, Paul says that the church is to support only those widows *within* the covenant community who have brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, cared for the afflicted, and devoted themselves to every good work. (1 Tim. 5:10)

So, now in light of all this, listen to what one commentator says and see if you can discern the subtle, but very profound error in his words:

“Early Christian visitation was anchored in... Jesus’ practice of ministering to the marginalized and hurting... Jesus cared for the marginalized and urged his followers to participate in visitations and care for the naked, sick, and imprisoned... The example of Jesus... has led many to a life dedicated to the poor and wounded, and one thinks here both of St. Francis and the founders of hospitals and hospice ministries.” (McKnight; NICNT on James 1:27)

The problem here is not that hospitals and hospice ministries are bad, or that St. Francis didn’t do “good” things. The problem is that this commentator has taken the concept of social justice in the New Testament, and applied it without any reference at all to the context of the redeemed covenant community. In support of his statement that Jesus called His followers to participate in visitations and care for the naked, sick, and imprisoned, he references Matthew 25.

- Matthew 25:31–40 — When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of **these my brothers** [the sheep], you did it to me.”

The commentator I quoted knows that Jesus specifically mentions “these my brothers,” but he just ignores the covenantal meaning of these words. **What is it** about feeding, and welcoming, and clothing, and visiting the brothers that’s so pleasing in God’s sight? It’s uniquely and especially love for the brothers *because they are disciples of Jesus* that expresses love for the Father and a true submission to His word. So listen to what Jesus said **to the disciples**:

- Matthew 10:40–42 — Whoever receives **you** receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives **a prophet because he is a prophet** will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives **a righteous person because he is a righteous person** will receive a righteous person’s reward. And whoever gives **one of these little ones** even a cup of cold water **because he is a disciple**, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”

Are you seeing how just like with the Old Testament, the New Testament emphasis on “social justice” can never be rightly understood or applied without a thorough understanding of the context of the **covenant** and the **covenant community**? Liberation theology exalts the social justice but utterly ignores the covenant context – leading, inevitably, to a counterfeit “gospel.”

V. Liberation Theology, Social Justice, and the “Mission” of the Church

Now once again, all of this is not to say that God doesn’t care about justice and righteousness outside the walls of the church or that we shouldn’t care either. God hates injustice wherever it’s found and all sinners will ultimately answer to Him on the day of judgment. It’s a good thing for Christians to work for the change of truly unjust social structures through legislative or other law-abiding means, **but this is not the “mission” or the “calling” of the church**. It’s not even one half or one quarter of the mission or the calling of the church. Do you realize that that’s a “heretical” thing to say in much of the professing church today? So let me say it again, and more clearly: The churches role or “mission” is not to bring social justice to the world, but to bring the Gospel of justification and forgiveness of sins to the world so that those who repent, and believe, and are forgiven might experience within the “walls” of the church what true social justice is and ultimately be welcomed into the new heavens and the new earth where only righteousness will dwell. (cf. 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 22:14-15) Listen to what Jesus said:

- Mark 10:29–30 — Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left **house** or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or **lands, *for my sake and for the gospel***, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, **houses** and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and **lands**, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

And then see how this is being fulfilled today “inside” the New Covenant community:

- Acts 4:32, 34–35 — The full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of **lands** or **houses** sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Can the church show compassion to the poor and oppressed in the world? Yes, but this is not our “mission.” It’s just one possible (and good) context for our primary calling to preach the Gospel to lost and guilty and hell-bound sinners – whether rich or poor, slave or free. (cf. Pregnancy Resource Center, PADS, food pantries, etc.)

Think of the ministry of Jesus. When Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead to life, He wasn’t just “car[ing] for the marginalized.” These miracles were always “signs” of the truth of His message as He called people to repent and enjoy life in the kingdom as His forgiven, covenant people.[†] The miracles of Jesus were always communicating a theological message. They were all “signs” pointing to the reality that Jesus would carry in Himself all the plagues, and sicknesses, and judgments of God that were due to his covenant people because of their sin.

- Isaiah 53:4–5 — Surely he has borne our sicknesses and carried our pains; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.
- Matthew 8:16–17 (cf. 1 Pet. 2:24) — That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”

Jesus’ miracles were motivated by compassion not **only** for our physical needs (cf. Mat. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; Luke 7:13), but especially by an even deeper compassion for our spiritual need for repentance, and forgiveness, and rescue from the righteous judgment of God.

[†] Of course, Jesus miracles were also “**miracles**”(!) (or wonders) designed to authenticate to the people His person and teaching. In this sense, they were unique to Jesus’ day (and in a secondary sense, to the Apostolic period). So we should recognize that there is a difference between the miracles of Jesus and “mercy” ministry today. Additionally, the authenticating power of Jesus’ miracles was intimately bound up with the teaching and theology that they signified.

VI. Liberation Theology, Social Justice, Slavery, and the True Gospel

And so we see that while true “social justice” is “good news,” in the Bible it’s not the Apostolic “Gospel.” Instead, it’s always the result and the fruit of that Gospel as the Gospel brings into being this repentant and forgiven and born again new covenant community called the church.

Liberation theology reads the Bible, but always without any acknowledgment of its covenant context, and so even when it doesn’t intend to, **it always ends up distorting and perverting the true, saving gospel of Jesus Christ**. It always ends up minimizing or denying the total depravity of man and the true seriousness of personal sin, the holiness of God, and consequently also the true love of God. Liberation theology minimizes the importance of doctrine – of justification through repentant faith in Christ and His substitutionary blood sacrifice on the cross. And so liberation theology and the social justice “Gospel” is a Satanic lie that’s made all the more powerful and deadly because it’s mixed with truth. Social justice is not the mission of the church because social justice is not the Gospel, and the calling of the church is to preach the Gospel – and to *be* the community created by that true Gospel.

So what does all of this mean for Peter and the topic of slavery? Maybe, now, we can see why Peter never once speaks against the institution of slavery. This isn’t to say that he approved of slavery or thought it was a good idea, but only that what truly mattered to Peter was that even slavery could be a platform and a context for the faithful living out of the true Gospel – and, of course, it was this Gospel that Peter was called and commissioned to preach. In fact, for Peter, slavery—even slavery to an unjust master—was in some sense the **ULTIMATE**(!!!) platform and context for faithfully living out the Gospel, and so when he addresses the slaves, he’s really addressing them only as a model for us all.

Can you see how truly “radical” this is (far more radical than any liberation theology), and how it actually strikes the death blow to “liberation theology”? When Peter commands slaves to submit themselves to unjust masters, he does so only because this command really and truly is rooted and grounded in the good news—the Gospel—of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

So how can this be? How does this work? If we’ve already seen what’s unbiblical and wrong with liberation theology and the social justice Gospel, then how are we to see that Peter’s command to slaves really is an expression and a living out of the true Gospel? That’s the question Peter will answer for us next week as we come back to our text this morning.

But for now, I only want to ask: Are we a covenant community truly characterized by “social justice”? In other words, in all of our relationships with one another, are we characterized in every way by righteousness and justice, and purity and love? Are we prepared to sell our “extra” possessions in order to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters, even as Barnabas was in Acts? (Acts 4:36-37) Are we stewarding our money so as to have plenty of money to give and meet the needs of others in the body of Christ – whether in this local body or around the world? Are we caring for one another and seeking to meet the physical needs of one another? Are we giving cups of cold water to others simply because they are disciples? And then, are we truly mindful of

our true mission and calling as the Church to faithfully and clearly preach the Gospel of justification and acceptance with God through the shed blood of Jesus Christ?