

# Distinctive in the world and at work

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[ 0 : 00 ] So the reading today comes from 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 13 to 25, and this can be found on page 1220 of the Church Bibles.

So that's 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 13 to 25. Be subject, for the Lord's sake, to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear. God. Honour the emperor. Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.

For this is a gracious thing. When, mindful of God, one endures sorrow with suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?

[ 1 : 28 ] But when you do good and suffer for it, you endure. This is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

He committed no sin. He committed no deceit. Neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we may die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseers of our souls.

Well, good morning. I hope you can hear me. My name is Chris, a member of the church family here. And first, a word about the notes on the back. When I sent these to Vicky for printing out, it was some time before I finalised my sermon.

[ 2 : 54 ] So now I feel a bit like the pianist who played Rachmaninoff. All the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order. So I hope I shall touch on most of my notes, but not necessarily in the same order.

If you find that a bit of a muddle, then just ignore the notes completely and see what Peter has to say to us. But I will add one prayer to what Simon's already prayed.

Our Father, thank you again for this one of the world's great letters. We can read it in our own language and take it to heart. And we pray again for your Holy Spirit to be our teacher through the word this morning.

In the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Well, first with a page, or half a page rather, of the letter. This half page. The Christian reader may well be tempted to zoom to verse 24. What a text. He himself, Christ himself, bore our sins in his body on the tree, that is the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

[ 4 : 10 ] Echoes there of Isaiah 53 from the Old Testament prophets. I hope many of us know 1 Peter 2.24. For me, it stands alongside verses like John 3.16.

And if I'm talking in riddles, that's John as in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Chapter 3, verse 16. The one that begins, God so loved the world. 1 John 4.

The first letter of John. Chapter 4, verses 9 and 10. Or even in this same letter. 1 Peter 3.18. Classic texts about the heart of our faith that has saved us.

Well, I will come to that verse, but we must first hold back a little bit and see it in its proper context and start our exploring, as required by this series, at verse 13.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution. What an unpopular text. Simon Peter. Apostle and elder.

[ 5 : 20 ] What are you talking about? Are we to be ever submissive? In subjection? In obedience? Are we the Tory party at prayer?

However, those few confrontational words could make a whole sermon, but not today. But it applies to any authority, whether it's a school prefect, a school teacher, the police, all sorts of bosses, human authority, traffic wardens, and so on.

If Christian believers never break the law, or never broke the law, what would happen to South African apartheid?

Or the Jim Crow rules in the southern states of America? Votes for women? Illegal strikes? Child labour? The slave trade?

Is there no room for disobeying? Today, August the 7th. How come that while 9-11 is known the world over, 6-8 yesterday is almost forgotten?

[ 6 : 33 ] By comparison. But far more lives were lost at Hiroshima. Are we now to take orders to massacre hundreds of thousands of civilians, men, women, and children?

And then Simon Peter says, oh now, calm down, calm down. Remember me from the early days in the Acts of the Apostles that Luke wrote, Acts chapter 4, earlier on in the New Testament.

And Peter says there, Peter with John, whether it's right in the sight of God to listen to you, you human leaders, rather than God, you must judge.

You make up your mind. And then chapter 5 in Acts, the next page, Peter again says, we must obey God rather than men. So that's pretty clear.

And to come back to his letter, verse 13 could sound like a master cracking a whip. Do as I say, do as they say. But his tone of voice is rather heard in verse 11, back in verse 11.

[ 7 : 42 ] Beloved, beloved, I urge you, as sojourners and exiles, he says elsewhere, dearly beloved, we urge you, as those who have not seen the Lord Jesus, but who love him.

And that's like us, I hope, who need to love one another. Then be subject. I urge you, the context is a gentle admonition, not a crack in the whip by a slave master.

Because the authorities, verse 14, are sent to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. But what if they praise those who do evil and punish those who do good?

Or even if it's doubtful, who are the legitimate rulers? Is it the Ukraine or the Russians? Is it Beijing or Hong Kong?

Is it Pilate or Herod? Not always very clear. To put it mildly, those words in verse 13 do it rather different in the context of the whole letter and indeed the whole New Testament.

[ 8 : 54 ] We are still to do good, verse 15. And the motivation is there. That by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

Live as people who are free, but not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. We are not anarchists and we are not living in anarchy, but we have a motivation for our freedom in these verses.

And then verse 17. Archbishop Layton, 1670, calls this verse a precious cluster of divine precepts.

I love the way we heard the reading when it was slowed down for that verse 17. I hope you noticed. Not in itself a complete rule of life, but each one is a seed that must be planted and grow.

Honor everyone. Everyone? See, there's a text against racism. Honor those different from yourself. Honor those less able than you.

[ 10 : 13 ] Honor those who are disabled, handicapped, or dying. Honor the Dalits of India, the lowest below the caste system of all.

Honor prisoners, outcasts, asylum seekers, everyone, no exception there. Love the brotherhood. There's no love quite like this, is there?

If you're in the brotherhood, you know that special love for our brothers and sisters. Even when the brotherhood don't always seem so brotherly or sisterly.

We're to love one another. That means the same thing. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Ah. Why is this number three and not number one or number four?

I'm not sure. Perhaps to prepare us for the last one, which is honor the emperor. Notice, we fear God, but we don't fear the emperor. We don't worship or idolize him.

[ 11 : 17 ] Even when his name, the emperor's name, is Nero. As it probably was during the writing of this letter. To honor him, in spite of all his atrocities, cruelties, violence, and murders, is actually

to cut him down to size.

To say, no, we do not fear him. We do not obey him. We do not submit always to him. But we honor him.

After they've killed you, there's no more that they can do, says Jesus. Cross-reference, if you know the story of Daniel in the Old Testament. He honored his various emperors, but he didn't always obey them.

He certainly didn't fear them, or doesn't seem to fear them. And he certainly never worshipped them. Or on a different level, the midwives in Egypt, who didn't obey Pharaoh, who said, kill the boy babies.

No, they disobeyed. Do we find it hard to honor some of today's leaders? I guess we sometimes do. In one of the hustings for the election of the mayor of London, this is not recent.

[12:36] This goes back a few years. The hustings was held, of all places, in St. Paul's Cathedral. And the first question from the floor, from the pew, was, I quote, Why do we have to choose between a crook, a joker, and a no-hoper?

Well, the chairman or chairperson had to work out which was which. At least we had a choice. Now, Simon Peter has no choice. And his situation is far more harsher than ours is.

And verse 18 sharpens the focus to a smaller scale. The household, the business, the school or college. We're all servants of God.

And the word actually there is slaves of God, verse 16. But some people, perhaps most of us, are also servants of human masters, verse 18.

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust. Even servants and slaves in the Roman Empire could have quite a responsible role in a large Roman household.

[13:58] We're not quite to think of 18th century slave trade, not quite the same word. But the temptation for a Christian servant of a Christian master or a Christian employee of a Christian boss is to take liberties, to cross the line, or perhaps if the line isn't there.

As if being a brother or a sister can make us less of a servant. This is a timeless issue, isn't it? From the first century to the 21st. But the key word in this little section is not actually servants, but suffering. Suffering comes four or five times in these verses.

Suffering in general could suggest just that word by itself.

A long illness. Incurable pain. Hospitals, nurses, carers. Unjust suffering, verses 19 and 20, is something every employee knows.

[15:07] A gracious thing in the sight of God.

And indeed in the sight of everyone. If you can bear unjust suffering, whether it's a trivial level, as it sometimes is, or much more serious.

And in the sight of everyone. I haven't dwelt on all the surprises here, but one surprise is surely that Peter has to repeat the reality of deserved suffering.

In verse 20 and then again in chapter 3, verse 17. Clearly it was not unknown for Christians to have a bad work record. And Peter says, don't do it.

Don't let that happen. Don't suffer for what you deserve. But the sufferings under Nero, to come back to harsh reality, was something else again.

[16:09] Not just being picked on for small failings or overlooked for promotion. But stepping out of line and then being hauled off in chains to death row in a far from merciful execution.

Or having your limbs chopped off on the way. Or buried alive. Or burned alive. We must relate Peter's words to our own relatively calm situation of less danger.

But we dare not trivialize it while so many of our brothers and sisters, Christians today, are living in Nero situations.

Or worse than Nero. We seem to have invented more cruelties as the centuries turn. And again, some may not even be sure who their masters are.

Why no word here, Simon Peter, on the duties of masters and rulers? It's all about what to do when you're servants. Well, other New Testament letters do have some clear guidelines for the bosses, the leaders.

[17:17] But maybe here, because it was far more of Peter's readers were servants than masters. And they needed more support if you're a Christian slave or Christian servant.

But now verse 21, another slight change of key, like a piece of music. Verse 21, where are we? Look down.

For to this you have been called. It's a high calling from God, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you might follow in his steps.

I will go on. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

There's a change of key, because like his friend Paul, Simon Peter cannot speak of suffering without looking to the cross. In the church's creeds, which are put together much later, of course, we say that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate.

[18:30] That's the Apostles' Creed, as it's called. Or the Nicene Creed, quote, he suffered and was buried. And each time that word suffered has tremendous weight.

Let's not rattle it off when we do use the creed, as if it was just one of a list. He suffered. He suffered. Jesus of Nazareth was not the only one to suffer those foul, undeserved atrocities, but his suffering served two unique purposes, not just one.

And here more than ever, we tread on holy ground. And I can hardly speak adequately of these dreadful yet glorious things.

One, Jesus is our powerful example and inspiration. That's verses 21 and 23 that I have read.

In so many ways, his goodness, his kindness, his thoughtfulness, his courage, his wisdom. Ah, but wait a minute. Why does Peter focus here on the speech and silence of his master?

[19:54] He could have taken all sorts of things in which Jesus is our pattern. He focuses on his speech and his silence. Well, you may have your suggestions. Here is mine.

Simon Peter knew and his friends knew that he himself was not a very good model or pattern of either speech or silence.

When it came to opening his mouth and keeping it shut. You may have a different problem or it may be yours too. But if you take these words about his example to heart, most humbly, and yet stay short of verse 22, at verse 22, here's a great example which leaves us actually hopeless.

I can hardly begin to reflect on how far short I fall of the example, the pattern of my master.

What hope is there? I'm a hopeless model in following Jesus. Jesus. So we come to verse 24, the big one.

[21:13] The second unique purpose of the cross. Jesus is our atonement, our salvation. And the tree language, look down if you're following, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.

That's the language of Peter speaking in Acts of the Apostles in the early days. He was on the tree. And that's the language of Peter writing his letter.

Because the scriptures, in the scriptures, the law says, cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree.

That's in the fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy, verse 21.

The curse comes to those who hang on a tree. And the curse that was due to us was willingly borne by Jesus.

And that cross was the tree where he bore it for us. If this is true, if what I've said and what Peter says is true, what value has anything else compared with this?

[22:24] What prizes, what gold medals and cups and fame and achievements can possibly rival our dependence on the tree where Jesus bore the curse for us?

But is it true? Is it true? Here's someone who says, well, I don't honestly think my sins are very great. That's the creed of a great many people in this country.

I don't think I've committed any great sins. My mind goes back to the vicar who married us. He was an old chap, must have been about 50. I thought he was an old man in those days.

But he used to add little words when he quoted the Bible. He would say, if we say we have no sin, we deceive, now normally he would say we deceive ourselves. He would say we deceive only ourselves.

And that hit home. If we say we have no sin, or even if our sins are very small, we deceive only ourselves. Or why did the Son of God come to this earth to bear such a burden of the sins of the world?

[23:36] But on the other side, here's someone else. Is this you who says my sins are simply beyond counting or weighing? I've done things that nobody in this room knows about.

And if they did, they wouldn't want to speak to me again. They wouldn't want to know me. I'm deeply ashamed. What am I to do? I've sinned against people who are no longer in this world. I can't say sorry to them. How can God possibly overlook the mess that I have made? And that may be you. Sometimes it's me.

To which the gospel answer is verse 24. We don't honour the Lord by sticking with just one of his unique achievements.

There are some who dwell so long on the example, they never reach the atonement. And that's fatal. While others are so full of the forgiveness of sins that they never take in the force of his example.

[ 24 : 58 ] Some of our songwriters, I think, fall into that category. Great on forgiveness, but where's the example? And we inherit our precious, beautiful, repeated event which holds them both together, which we shall observe in a moment.

And celebrate it, the Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. What a precious memorial that is of all that Jesus did on the tree, on the cross, with his body and his blood, and which we show forth the Lord's death until he comes.

Well, there remains one more verse before we take the bread and the cup. Elsewhere, in Peter's letter, he talks about the future. 2.25, the last verse of our section today, is about what we were and where we are.

You were straying like sheep. Echo of Isaiah 53 again. Was it John Newton, 18th century? I think it may have been, who said, I'm not what I should be.

I'm not what I want to be. I'm not what I shall be. But praise God, I'm not what I was. I'm not what I was.

[ 26 : 16 ] Can you say that? You've been coming here for some time. You often hear the preacher or the leader say, if there's someone here who's just looking on the Christian faith, or not yet sure.

Can you say, I'm not what I was. Praise God. And the next bit, can you say where you are now?

You have returned, says Peter. You've been returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

You're in the care of the good shepherd, the great shepherd. And no one can snatch you from his hands. Not your colleagues, not your boss, not your family, not Nero, not Satan.

No one. You'll not be short of things to talk about over coffee, with or without my notes. Let's pray.

You've heard it more than once already. You'll hear it again. Praise my soul, the King of heaven. To his feet your tribute bring. Here we are. Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

[ 27 : 35 ] Who like me, who like you, his praise should sing. Hallelujah. Praise the everlasting King. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.