

True Submission

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[0 : 00] As we stand, let's pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Please turn to the passage that was read for us earlier, 1 Peter chapter 2, on page 217. And if you could put your finger in the passage there at about verse 11, we'll be referring to that passage this morning.

And I'm grateful that David has agreed to illustrate this sermon with a flip chart while I preach. When I was a student in England, we lived for three years in a four-bedroom house in Oxford, for which we paid the ridiculously low rent of £150 sterling per month.

This was about one quarter of the going rate. And we were given this amazing deal solely because of the kindness of our Christian landlord, who was also one of my former teachers at Regent College.

Now, someone very close to us who is not a Christian was left quite speechless by this act of generosity. This was astonishing to him, unbelievable, and it gave him a huge respect for our landlord.

[1 : 20] This landlord is a well-known evangelist who appears often on television and is well-known in England and in Canada. And by this one act of generosity, he broke every stereotype our non-Christian friend had of evangelists.

Clearly, this was no hypocrite. Clearly, this was not a man who was in it for the money. A few years later, this man, who was once my teacher and now my landlord, he moved back to England and settled in Nottingham.

He signed a deal to buy an old character house, parts of which dated back all the way to the 16th or 17th century. He made the real estate deal subject to an inspector taking a look at a beam to make sure that it was structurally sound.

The inspector said it would have to be replaced, and so the contract of sale for the house was renegotiated to provide a 5,000 pound reduction in the price of the house.

That's over \$10,000. So time passed, and eventually he moved into this house. And in due course, he called a contractor to replace the beam. The builder just laughed and said that if that beam had stood solid for 400 years, he wasn't too worried it was going anywhere soon.

[2 : 36] They confirmed that the beam would not have to be replaced. So what did my former teacher do? He hunted down the new address of the previous owner and went and knocked on his door.

When the man came to the door, he handed him a check for 5,000 pounds. The man was, as they say in England, gobsmacked. That is, he was left speechless, as if someone had slapped him in the face.

He couldn't open his gob, his mouth. Finally, when he recovered, he just stammered, you didn't have to do this. My former teacher threw his arm around the man's shoulder and said joyfully, well, you know, it's a lot like the grace of God.

Why don't we just stop right here and now and thank him? And so he prayed a prayer of thanksgiving with the previous owner and walked away. My guess is that that man stood for some moments longer on his front step with his jaw hanging open.

On one more occasion in England, when Carol and I had just given birth to our second child, we had house guests and things were, well, they were a little bit busy at home.

[3 : 45] There was a lot going on. Christian friends loaned us their car for a month since we didn't have one so we could get back and forth to the hospital and otherwise get around with our guests.

This was their only car. So this meant that they were walking and taking the bus to get around town. One of our house guests was not a Christian and he was speechless, gobsmacked.

All the more so when it seemed that every night there would be a knock on the door and another friend from church would arrive with a hot casserole. These are just three examples from our life, from my observation, of how acts of unselfconscious goodness and simple generosity by Christians can silence the accusations of non-Christians that they might bring against believers.

Quell the suspicion that Christians must be up to no good, really. This is exactly what we see in our text of Scripture this morning in 1 Peter 2, verses 13 to 25.

And in fact, we'll also look at the verses just above in 11 and 12 that kind of govern the text this morning. We'll work through this passage in a moment, but look with me now at just two verses.

[5 : 01] Verse 12 says, Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, So that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

And look also down at verse 15. For it is God's will that by doing right or good, you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. Maybe in a new revised translation of this verse it will say, you will leave them gobsmacked.

You and I, here in Vancouver in 2007, you and I can also live such good lives as Christians in non-Christian Vancouver that we leave people speechless.

This passage teaches us, I think, that we can do so by following three simple house rules. They're simple rules, but they're rules that go very deep. They're not simple in application.

First, always show respect. Second, do unmistakably good things for people. And thirdly, above all, follow Christ's pattern when you suffer.

[6 : 16] First then, always show respect. That's the first house rule. The social world of Peter's readers was one, like many traditional cultures today, where respect mattered, where honour was probably more important than just about anything else.

It was like a commodity that you could not live without. Some Asian societies today are very much oriented to shame and honour, and some that follow a British system of higher education, a system where your whole undergraduate degree is based on one final set of exams written over the course of a single week, and it's called suicide week.

That's what it's like to live in a shame-honour culture, where so much rides on it, on honour. So in some societies, honour is not just an interior feeling or shame, but something more like property you own that could be taken away or violated, something very concrete and objective.

In the ancient world, as in many cultures today, the loss of honour is not just bad feeling, it's a crisis, a serious loss of status. In Attic law in ancient Greece, insulting someone or disgracing them was more serious than bodily injury.

And in certain situations, if established in court, this could lead to capital punishment. Peter's readers had begun to lose honour and to suffer shame in their society because of their Christian faith.

[7 : 46] There were accusations of wrongdoing, rumours spreading, and social tension mounting. Peter refers to his readers as suffering a painful or sharp, fiery ordeal, a gut-wrenching time of testing, very strong words.

More than one quarter of all the uses of the verb to suffer in the New Testament, more than a quarter of them appear in this one short letter. How comforting it would have been for Peter's readers then to hear him describe all the permanent, unfading, indestructible blessings we have received in Christ.

Blessings that can never be taken away. And to hear of the praise, honour, and glory that we have now and will have in the future from God himself. How encouraging to be reminded of their true identity, as Dan preached about last week, how we are founded on Christ as cornerstone.

Just as they keenly felt the rejection of their society, so also they would read in Peter's letter that Christ was the stone the builders rejected, but a stone that was nevertheless chosen and precious to God and to us.

The one who trusts in him will never what? Will never be put to shame. In our passage this morning, there are six different Greek words that each have to do in a different way with this whole sphere of honour.

[9 : 13] Words like respect, submission, deference, honour, favour, praise, reverence, fear, and so on. Peter is talking their language. And he says to them, as I think he says to us, even when you are not treated with respect, give respect unconditionally to others and to authority.

House rule number one, always show respect. The first sphere, then, that Peter has in mind is the state and its rulers. Do Christians get to flout human authority just because they have a higher authority?

Do they get to opt out of deference to rulers because they are their own holy nation, their own chosen race, because they are strangers and aliens in the culture, spiritual landed immigrants? No, Peter says, precisely because we do have a higher authority, we can pay respect and submit to our rulers for the Lord's sake. Peter allows no scope at all for contempt of our rulers.

Verse 13, 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.

[10:30] Always show respect to the institution and to the individuals themselves who hold office, says Peter. And look down at verse 17. Honor all men.

Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. Do you see how in this verse there's a kind of outer frame and inner frame? You show respect to everyone.

You show respect to the emperor. So on the one hand, these verses are saying show honor and deference to every human creature and specifically to your rulers. But then there's this inner frame, something more intensive and intimate at the center.

Love your fellow believers and above all fear God. This is stronger and more intensive. This is your identity and this is where everything comes from. Christian civic obligations are carried out for the Lord's sake.

And that is why this submission to secular rulers can be an act of freedom. As it says in verse 16, live as free men. But of course, this is because you are loyal to a higher authority.

[11:40] Also it says, live as servants of God. Question. Does this mean that civil disobedience is never proper? Does this mean there is never a time to speak truth to power, to stand up and defy the authorities?

No, I don't think so. I don't think that's the conclusion we draw from this. Peter would never have allowed an unquestioning, naive, absolute obedience to the state.

That would be idolatrous. He was there when Jesus said, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's. And remember, this is the same Peter who in Acts chapter 4 stood up with John and defied the order of the Sanhedrin to their faces.

When they said to shut up and stop speaking about Jesus, Peter said, we must obey God rather than you, rather than human authority. This is true in the Old Testament too.

In the first chapter of the book of Exodus, we read of the Hebrew midwives, likewise defying the decree of Pharaoh to kill all the male babies born to Hebrew women. Quote, they feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do.

[12:53] So, of course, our submission to our rulers can never be absolute. But I think we can fail too often to accept that in the normal course of things, usually, we can, without violence to our conscience, submit and live respectfully under admittedly imperfect conditions of law and order.

We live not in imperial Rome, of course, but in a constitutional democracy. Stephen Harper is not Nero. We can, I think, read this passage in our context to mean that we ought to fully engage in the political process that we have available to us and in public debate, but we are to do so always with respect.

This is one of the house rules. This is fundamental. Even when we don't get no respect, even when we are ridiculed or marginalized as Christians, we show unconditionally respect to others for the Lord's sake.

This will go far towards silencing the ignorance of foolish men and women. And I should just say that there are people I'm very grateful for in our congregation and thinking of a couple of my colleagues at Regent College who actually do a superb job of demonstrating precisely these qualities in public debate, in the media, on television, on radio, and who are able to show respect even when commentators, pundits, aren't showing respect to them and who make the gospel winsome.

And I think that's what we're called to. Can I just pause to ask you whether you operate this way in all your dealings in public and private life in Vancouver? Would other people talk about you and the way you treat everyone else and say, you know, he or she, there's a person who treats everybody with dignity and engages in public debate with dignity and respect.

[14:57] Would they see you as a person whose Christianity makes you seek the welfare of the city? A person of goodwill. This leads on to our second house rule.

Rule number one, always show respect. But more than this, rule number two, and this, each rule in a sense becomes a little bit more intensive and goes a little bit deeper. Rule number two, do unmistakably good things for people.

Impeachably good. Be known for this. Verse 12, live good lives among the pagans. Verse 15, by doing right or good, silence, ignorant slanders. Verse 20, if you are to suffer, it should be for doing something good.

I think this is more now than just respect. This is a matter of letting your real life show, your life in Christ. Peter has much to say about the Christian way of life.

His distinctive word for this is *anastrophe*, a Christian way of being and behaving in the world. Distinctively, there's a winsomeness, a beauty about Christian holiness and the freedom to love in a way that's not self-serving.

[16:02] The spontaneous generosity, the kindness and the grace that should characterize the Christian way of life. The generosity of my friends in England that I spoke of is a good example of this.

But of course, there are many ways in public and private that we can, with real Christian joy, contribute generously to the well-being of our friends and neighbors and our city.

I can think of no better example just now than the commissioning last week here in our church of our friend Marian Maxwell for her work with Genesis Vancouver as she and her team of staff and volunteers seek to help mothers with children find a way out of sexual exploitation in long-term recovery programs.

This is, it seems to me, exactly the sort of thing that this passage is talking about, what Christians should be known for in secular society. The sort of Christians, the sort of people whose good work is unimpeachable and contributes to goodness undeniably.

There's a corollary to this, though, that's important to emphasize. Peter was not remotely romantic in his instruction to the believers in Asia Minor in this letter. This wasn't about dreaming ego fantasies of great good works projects of saving the world because of my largesse or about engaging in social justice activism while at the same time really just being a bit of a jerk in how you treat other people.

[17:36] I remind my students sometimes that to be prophetic, sometimes we think we're being prophetic and really we're only whining. Anger at injustice can so easily turn into self-righteousness.

But not for Peter. Again and again, he comes back to paying attention to ourselves and our own hearts. Be holy in all you do.

Don't conform to your evil desires. Be self-controlled. Be self-controlled and alert. He begins at home, as it were. The first thing he says after saying that we are to live as exiles here, he says that kind of thing three times about being exiles.

The first thing he does in verse 11 and 12 is to offer a hard-hitting exhortation about realism, about our own sinfulness. Abstain from the sinful desires that wage against your soul.

And he gets very specific about our civic life and our work life. And he says again, maybe with a touch of irony, that just makes sure that when you're accused of wrongdoing that they really are false accusations.

[18:45] Maybe you are just an insufferable prig or a cheat or a lazy lout. Don't get a martyr complex over that. You get what's coming if you are really just suffering for wrongdoing.

For example, it would be a good thing. It would be this sign of goodness if you were audited by the Canada Revenue Agency because they needed confirmation that your charitable donations in 2006 really were as large as you claimed.

Just make sure that you're not being audited because you cheated on your tax return. That would be the other example, the contrary example. Well, House Rule Number 3, not only always show respect, not only do unmistakably good things for others, but Number 3, and supremely, above all, follow Christ's pattern when you suffer.

In verse 18, Paul moves on from talking about the state to talking to Christian domestics who work as slaves in pagan households. And here, too, he counsels respect, deference, even to the point of non-retaliation.

Just imagine how hard it would have been for some of these household servants. They would no longer offer the customary offering of incense or pouring out a bowl of wine to the household gods such as Minerva, seeking the blessing of the gods on the house.

[20 : 14] And this would seem obstinate. Why are they doing this? This is not, they would actually use the word, this is not pious. Their Christian activities would be suspect.

Masters might worry that they would bring dishonor on their households. Cruel masters would take a twisted delight in using this as an opportunity to inflict suffering on their servants. In this situation, Peter reminds the church that there is credit, favor, approval, these are all honor words, with God. God sees, God notices. And in fact, this suffering can be incorporated into the very highest form of Christian discipleship as one shares in Christ's own calling and example.

Does this mean that Peter was condoning slavery? And does this mean that the Bible counsels the oppressed to stay in situations of abuse, battered women, the oppressed poor, exploited children? No doubt this passage has been twisted by those in power to say this sort of thing at different times in history, but I don't think this is at all a faithful reading of this text or what the Bible says as a whole.

[21 : 36] Here's a few points to think about. First, the church in the first century is a profoundly minority presence in the Roman Empire without access to any significant political power and it's just not possible to imagine a world in which they could mount the sort of political campaign that we see later in Christian history to abolish slavery such as occurred in the 18th and 19th century under the Christian leadership of people such as William Wilberforce.

Given the institution of slavery as it was embedded in that society, Christians had to figure out how to live within it as aliens and foreigners. Secondly, when Paul does address a Christian slave owner, Philemon, he seems to counsel emancipation.

Thirdly, within the Christian community, slaves were treated as free in Christ and addressed as such as full members and brothers in Christ. None of the ancient moral codes even addressed instructions to slaves directly.

They didn't give them the dignity of even giving them direct instructions in these kind of household codes. and in fact, Aristotle said that slaves were not entitled to any kind of justice because they're simply a possession, a chattel.

The New Testament, in contrast, treated slaves with the dignity of free moral choice. Fourthly, in a different context, we see that where Paul could claim legal rights, he did so using his Roman citizenship to the full.

[23 : 12] So I think where we have opportunity to use legal rights, political processes, to use the freedom and resources that God has given us, we are obliged to use them to end the exploitation of the weak and to change the structures that we can.

May I speak a more personal word to anyone this morning who's here who feels trapped in an abusive relationship at home or at work, perhaps frightened to do anything about it because of the fear that you will be harmed or injured or shamed in some way.

I think you need the help and support of others to discern specifically what to do in your situation, to turn to someone safe and trustworthy for counsel about what particularly might be required in your very specific situation.

what though is Peter saying to us in this passage then? Saying to Christian slaves who are mistreated for being Christians.

In a sense he universalizes their situation to talk more generally about how Christians are to suffer when suffering is inevitable, when mistreatment comes and is inevitable.

[24 : 34] And I think he says something that applies to any of us in any situation of mistreatment that we are to follow Jesus' example, specifically Jesus' example of non-retaliation.

in a shame-honor society one might respond to a loss of honor by seeking revenge, by retaliating. Peter says no, this is not the Christian way.

Instead of retaliation, so again I'm contrasting this with protecting oneself, with getting out of a situation of abuse if you can, but in contrast to that in any situation of suffering the option that Peter denies believers is the option of retaliation.

We are, like Jesus, to entrust ourselves to the only one who alone in all situations judges justly.

How interesting when you think about it that this comes from Peter.

This is the Peter who rebuked Jesus when Jesus said that he would suffer and die and who then heard his Lord cut him off sharply saying, get behind me, Satan. That would have a way of sticking with you, being called Satan.

[25 : 42] This is the same Peter who had a sword strapped on his belt in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested and who sliced off the right ear of the high priest servant and who then heard Jesus say, put away your sword, put it away.

This is the same Peter who saw Jesus pass through suffering and death to resurrection and exaltation at God's right hand as we remember this Ascension Sunday.

Later in 1 Peter, he will appeal to his readers as one who is a witness to Christ's suffering and one who will share in the glory to be revealed. In fact, at least six times in this letter, Peter appeals to this cycle of suffering followed by glory, the cross followed by the crown.

This is the Peter who finally got it, who finally understood. The way of the cross was a part of the revelation of God's glory. In chapter three, he will pick up this theme again and show how we are united to participate with Christ in a kind of suffering that leads to victory.

Retaliation would not be the way of the suffering Christian. Do you know that there is no imprecatory tradition in the early church?

[27 : 03] That is, there is no literature of calling down curses on enemies and persecutors. there is the sense instead that when such suffering comes, instead of an escalation of violence and retaliation, one could entrust oneself to God as Jesus did, and know that the outcome would be redemptive.

So Peter quotes in our passage from Isaiah 53 of Christ as the suffering servant, and says that this is a pattern for us. The word in our text, example, or pattern, is the word that would be used for a standard alphabet to be copied by students in school learning who are learning to write, or for an artist's outline to be finished off and filled in by his apprentices.

Do you know how you sometimes see a work of art, a painting in a gallery, that has an attribution, something like from the workshop or from the school of Rembrandt or whatever? I think that's the idea here.

Can people look at us when we are experiencing mistreatment, injustice, when we are suffering because we are Christians, and can they say of the way we act, this is recognizably from the workshop of Christ.

This is a school piece, definitely, recognizably, this is after the manner of Jesus himself. As evangelicals, we are fond of teaching the central message of Christ's suffering on our behalf to rescue us from our sins, as this passage teaches.

[28 : 38] By his wounds you have been healed. But Jesus' suffering is not only substitution, it is also example, it is also pattern. When we've kept the house rules of respect and good, generous behavior, we may still suffer as Christians.

God sees that, God honors that. We have Jesus' example. God's example. We need not retaliate, escalate the violence.

We can lay down our very lives in faith that he will raise them up again. He remains supremely, the supreme shepherd and guardian of our very souls, our very lives.

So this is a distinctively Christian call not to retaliate, but to trust in God. This is not Stoicism or Buddhism that asks that we adjust our expectations, think differently, stifle our desires.

No, the distinctive Christian teaching begins, proceeds, and ends with Jesus Christ. Christ embraced suffering. He didn't just ignore it or think it away, and he triumphed over it, went through it, and by doing so he demonstrated what for Peter is a new anastrophe, a new way of life, a whole new way of being in the world that has authority.

[30 : 00] It has spiritual and moral authority. It certainly did so in the early church. This also left pagans speechless. A few centuries later, after this letter was written, the suffering of Christians in the Roman Empire became very intense.

There was a slave woman at Carthage, a Christian, named Felicitas. And she, for naming the name of Christ, for being a Christian, she was sentenced to the arena to be executed to face the wild beasts in the arena.

She was about eight months pregnant, and in prison the night before her execution, she prayed that she would be able to give birth and to deliver. God answered her prayer and she entered into labor, and while she was crying out in the pain of childbirth, a soldier standing nearby mocked her pain and said, if you're suffering like this now and crying out in agony now, just imagine what it's going to be like tomorrow.

And Felicitas responded with just a couple lines and then she disappears from history. But with these lines, she goes down to the great doctors of the church and she said, now I suffer what I suffer, but then another will be with me who will suffer for me even as I suffer for him. This sort of witness by ordinary Christians was indeed found to have a powerful vertus, a virtue, an authority that spoke volumes.

[31 : 36] Tertullian said the blood of the martyrs was like seed for the church. Within a few generations then of 1 Peter, the lifestyle he called for was in fact lived out by thousands of Christian women and men in the midst of their society and was seen as a powerful witness.

I think increasingly we need the advice of a letter like 1 Peter written to a minority Christian community in an overwhelmingly pagan culture. We need to learn how to live in this culture. Peter gives us house rules, always show respect, be known for actions that are unimpeachably good, and when you suffer, don't retaliate, but follow the pattern of Jesus. Jesus. As we come to the Lord's Supper today, I invite you to come to the table, come to Christ, praying as we do in the prayer of humble access that we may ever more dwell in him and he in us, and then go out with Christ to live such a good life among the unbelievers in this city that they may be left utterly speechless and might ask you the reason for the hope you have. Amen.