

Serving and Suffering... Just Like Jesus

1 Peter 2:18-21

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Steve DeWitt

"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 sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if 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." (1 Peter 2:18-21)

Back in January we had the fifth largest blizzard in Chicago history hit on a Sunday morning. We did something we hadn't done since 1999—we canceled all our services. Like all other families, the DeWitt family was snowed in for two days. We were talking about what to do when Jennifer said, "I've wanted to watch that *Downton Abbey* show I hear people talk about."



With absolutely nothing else to do, I was willing to give PBS' *Masterpiece Theatre* a try (and make my wife happy). About two episodes in, we were hooked. Over the next weeks we watched five years of episodes and we will be jittery and shaky until the next season comes out in January 2016.

The show is set in early 20th century Britain and features a huge estate and castle in which an Earl and his family live and are served by a staff of cooks, footmen, personal assistants, and a really cool butler. Part of the intrigue is the very clear cultural and social standards by which they operate. Everything publicly is very dignified and orderly. But behind the scenes, especially with the staff of the house, you see all the backbiting, cheating, lying, and stealing that you probably see in your workplace.

Let me introduce you to a few of the characters:



Earl of Grantham: Lord of the house and estate; a benevolent, but privileged type.

Carson: Butler and boss over all the staff.

O'Brien: Assistant to the Earl's wife. Gossip. Devious. Divisive.

Anna: Housekeeper. Sweet. Kind. Girl next door.

Tom Barrow: Satan. Evil. Tortured soul. Thief. Slanderer. Always working an angle. Love to hate him.

Mrs. Hughes: Head of housekeeping. Mother and soul of the staff.

There are more than these, but these will do. The show is really well written and I think its popularity is in that we can relate so easily to the characters on the serving staff. Some seem to be generally good-hearted; the kind of people you'd like to get to know. Others are the kind of people we already know and wish we didn't (conniving, manipulative, etc.). They mock the Earl and the family. They work out of gross self-interest. They are one way when the Earl or the family is watching but everyone knows what they are like behind the scenes.

How might you discern if anyone on the *Downton Abbey* service staff is a Christian? Could you possibly tell a person's faith by the way they conduct themselves in their employment? How they relate to their employer? The quality of effort they give? How they treat others?

Last week we saw what Christian citizens should look like. Respect government authority whether it is the emperor or the police officer. They deserve our honor even if they are maniacal like the emperor at the time, Nero.

Now Peter addresses Christians in another social structure, the workplace and workplace relationships. Complicating our understanding of this is that the world in which Peter wrote was very different from our own. Notice verse 18, "*Servants, be subject to your masters.*" At the time 1 Peter was written, nearly all Roman families had servant staff. Get this, one quarter of the entire population of the Roman Empire were slaves. As Christianity spread, it spread through all levels of society including the slave population. One whole book of the Bible, Philemon, speaks into the difficulties of this aspect of society when Christian slave owners and Christian slaves are also Christian brothers.

A further wrinkle for us is that when we hear "slave" we think of British or American slavery. That was not the experience of slaves in the first century generally. In fact the word in verse 18 is not the word for "slave in the field" but "servant in the house." So you need to think more *Downton Abbey* than *Roots*. These servant slaves were considered the property of the owner, but they served in a variety of roles as managers and even trained professionals like doctors, teachers, even musicians. There were extensive Roman laws about the slaves and they were generally well-treated (with many, many exceptions due to human nature not Roman legislation).

Wayne Grudem says there is no current comparable status in the Western world. Think *Downton Abbey* with this difference—the staff are legally owned and serve at the master's purpose and pleasure. It was the most common employer/employee relationship in the ancient world, and Grudem adds, this means the application of the text to work and vocation is very appropriate (Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, p. 124).

So what should a Christian in the workplace look like? Act like?

Respectful Attitude

"*Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect.*" (Verse 18)

The NRSV translates it, "*Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference.*" That's pretty plain and most of us understand what this is getting at. It's about our attitude toward authority. This doesn't mean we are floor mats to be continually walked over but it does mean that we should show respect for the authority an employer has over us. Notice it says, with **all** respect. This includes our words, our responses, and our general demeanor. Our boss should get the sense from us that we are on his team. The opposite is belligerence, defiance, rudeness, or resistance.

We all probably have stories of people we have observed in the workplace whose attitude is quite different from "all respect." In some workplaces, it's culturally acceptable or even expected that there be tension and opposition to employers. Here is where we should be challenged by the fact that Peter writes to owned slaves and tells them to respect their masters. If even slaves are to respect their owners, I'd say we have it much easier in American labor to respect an employer. Think of their working conditions, their pay, their lack of freedom, yet these did not excuse them from needing to respect authority. The modern American workplace has far more opportunity and rewards than any 1st century Roman slave could dream of.

Ask yourself, does my boss sense from me my respect for his or her position over me?

Do I hear murmuring? *You don't know the terrible boss I have! He's a megalomaniac. She's a slave-driver!* I'll show him respect when he starts acting respectable.

"*Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.*" (Verse 18) The Greek word for unjust is the same word we get scoliosis from. Scoliosis is when your spine is crooked. The morally crooked boss. ESV uses "unjust." The NASB defines it as "unreasonable." The NIV chooses "harsh." The NLT says "cruel." Yep, that pretty much describes him to a T.

It's generally easy to respect authorities over us that are "good and gentle." I think *Downton Abbey's* Carson is a good man at heart. I wouldn't mind working for him at all. I think the Earl is a good guy overall. Sometimes we are blessed to have bosses whose management style and feel looks like that. The real test of our faith is when we have the opposite. Some of you right now want to raise your hands. Bosses are sinners too. They play favorites, make enemies, nurse grudges, or worse. Working for these bosses requires the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job. This is why Peter writes about it. If respecting government was easy, he wouldn't waste ink on it. If all bosses were wonderful, he wouldn't waste ink on it either.

He's writing to Christians who find themselves and their faith and values at odds with the culture around them. The friction points are anywhere that Christianity and the world intersect: citizenship – Christianity in the nation; vocation – Christianity in the workforce. Coming up is Christianity in marriage. These are where real life is lived. These are where the counter-cultural force of lived-out Christianity looks most different. Christians living in the world have to make it work when the values of the world contradict our moral and spiritual callings as Christians. What do we do?

In the workforce, we have a respectful attitude. But it is not just attitude.

Respectful Action/Excellent Work Ethic

If I had time I'd go to Paul's teaching on this (Ephesians 6:5-9). He says that Christian workers should work as unto the Lord, not just when the boss is around and looking. Peter says the same, "*For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.*" (Verse 19)

God is pleased when we do what is right and pleasing to him, even when it means we suffer for it. What is the right thing in context? Respecting our employer's wishes. Serving faithfully in a difficult situation. You may think, *That's hard to do in a job!* Actually, there is a harder one coming (chapter 3). What about a wife in a difficult and awkward marriage? You may have a hard boss, but you don't have to share a bed with him or her.

The burden for the Christian worker is serving joyfully and faithfully and respectfully when the workplace is hard. When the boss is hard. When the culture on the job is hard or immoral or unethical or anti-Christian. Slaves and owned servants had no way out.

What is the key? See the phrase "*mindful of God*"? What does that mean? Our sufferings are not in a vocational or spiritual vacuum. God is with us on the job site as much he is with us at church in prayer. A Christian worker works at their job "mindful of God." Mindful of his watchful eye. Mindful of his promises and provision. Mindful of his ability to right the wrongs and bring justice with an eye toward his glory and pleasure in me at work.

Some places have these days where you can bring your kids to work with you. It's called "Take Your Child to Work Day." For a Christian, every day is "Take God to Work Day." This means I see all authority over me as being established by God. Even Jesus practiced this as he submitted to the authority of Pilate and acknowledged his heavenly Father had

put Pilate in place (John 19:11). If the Son of God can submit to Pilate, might we need to do the same to the Pilates over us?

God used John 19:11 in my life. Many years ago I had a boss who had it out for me. He was polite but I knew there were ulterior motives with me. I was quite distraught as he pressed his authority over me. I remember reading John 19 over vacation and the Spirit of God applied that verse to my heart, *"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."* I thought, Jesus submitted to Pilate, who is about to order his execution because he saw Pilate's authority over him as coming from God the Father. If Jesus submitted to Pilate, I must submit to this guy. I met with him, apologized for any insubordination, and told him from this point on I would be the best employee he ever had. We submit to the authority of man because we see that authority as coming from God.

Serving and Suffering in the Workplace is Honorable to God

"For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God." (1 Peter 2:19–20)

Not all suffering in the workplace is honoring to God. If you are unethical in the workplace and lose your job, don't roll out this verse. If you are a poor worker and lose your job because of performance, don't roll out this verse. If you are chronically late or lazy and are demoted, don't see that as some spiritual suffering for Jesus' sake. There is no honor in it. But if you respect your boss and seek to be the best employee you can be, and if you don't cut corners or cheat the company or compromise your integrity and those God-honoring virtues create headwinds for your career or hardship, then know that God is honored.

Sometimes Christians face moments where the boss or company expects them to compromise their integrity. These are moments that are very difficult because whole careers can be derailed. What would you do if the company leadership required you to misreport something and sign your name to it?

Here is where there is a difference between respecting authority and blind obedience to it. The Puritans used to say, *"If you have to choose between sin and suffering, always choose suffering."* Our allegiance to God trumps the need to submit to any human institution that requires us to compromise our faith. For a Christian, career advancement and financial success are not our ultimate goal. Are you prepared to take God to work with you and potentially lose vocationally or financially because you are mindful that he is watching?

When we do what is right and serve and suffer anyway, we are in good company, *"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."* (1 Peter 2:21)

Jesus: Our example of Serving and Suffering

Peter says a most extraordinary thing. Doing good and suffering for it is not just a possibility, it is our calling. Why? Because this is exactly what Jesus did for us. He obeyed and suffered for it.

Get this. Who's the bully boss in Jesus' life? Who is the tyrant? Who mistreated Jesus when he wouldn't compromise his integrity? Wouldn't turn the stones to bread? Wouldn't throw himself down from the corner temple? We look at being a Christian at US Steel or a student

at Purdue Cal like it's the ultimate example of a hard place for a Christian to be a Christian. It pales in comparison to what Jesus did when he came and suffered by us and for us.

Jesus was the ultimate exile. Talk about being out of your element. He wasn't a fish out of water; he was a King without his glory; the Lord without his observable majesty.

Yet he came here and worked in the Company of Mankind. Did he see things wrong with the management around here? Did he have helpful suggestions to improve the place that went unheeded? What about his salary? Why did the company of man hate him so much? Was it job performance? Was he lazy? Did he lack the skills necessary? Did he need training? What cause did Jesus give the Company of Man to mistreat him? Hate him? Beat him? Flog him? Despise him? Kill him?

Upper management wanted him gone but you don't fire God when he comes to earth. You don't put him on administrative leave. The only thing you can do when God is working for you and you don't want him anymore, is to kill him. That is what the management did. This in spite of all the wonderful good he did for the company! Now that doesn't seem fair, does it? He created the company. He worked for free. He fed the company. He healed the hurts of the company. He supplied the company with everything it needed for life.

For the very company you created, loved, served, taught, fed, and healed—for that company to turn on you and kill you—that must be wrong even in God's eyes.

If management fires you but God hires you back by raising you from the dead and then puts you on the highest throne of management and gives a title that is above every name, it would mean that in the eyes of God, willing and respectful service to even bad authority over you when done for God's sake, is glorious in the eyes of God. Jesus is our example.

So when your boss demeans you, mistreats you, overlooks you, disrespects you—but you do good for the company anyway, all you are doing is following in his steps. The steps of the life of Jesus. The most wonderful and glorious life ever lived.

So, my dear church, make sure you take God to work with you.

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