

So What Do I Do When I Am Unjustly Treated?

1 Peter 2:21-25

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Have you ever been wronged? The answer is probably obvious and easy. Maybe twice already today. We pick up these offenses in different sizes and measures. There are the small slights, like our kindnesses that go unacknowledged or unappreciated. There are medium level offenses like being lied to, cheated in business, or suffering gossip by a friend. There are big ones like adultery, divorce, or violence against a loved one. These are especially painful when they are done by family or fellow Christians—people we have loved and trusted.

Life is filled with severe disappointments; ones we deem unjust. Actions by others cause us suffering. What is our natural and human response? Retaliation. Bitterness. Violence. The Apostle Peter wrote to people who regularly suffered from unjust wrongs done against them. He knew they had to overcome evil done against them with good and even love lest they become like their abusers. But how could this be? Before us is the central text of Peter's Christology in which he gives the Christian response to wrongs done against us.

"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. 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. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might 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 Overseer of your souls." (1 Peter 2:20–25 ESV)

We spent some time in verse 20 last week. It is part of a section about Christians in the workplace. Our attitude and work ethic should be consistent with respectful submission to our employer's authority over us. In a perfect world that would mean our Christianity is respected in the workplace. Our coworkers praise us. Our bosses love us. We find ourselves fast-tracked toward career success. For the Christian exiles Peter wrote to, it generally meant rejection and glass ceilings everywhere. Doing the right thing at work would cost them. Cost them in their careers, finances, respect, and many other ways. This isn't right, is it? It seems unjust. But how do we respond when people wrong us? Wrong them back? *Oh, it's on, like Donkey Kong.*

"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." (Verse 21)

Peter's answer to unjust suffering is to point us to the example of Jesus. He unpacks this in the next verses. This verse holds three essentials. Note **first**, *"For to this you have been called."* (Verse 21) To what? A completely counter-cultural, counter-intuitive response to people who mistreat us. We are called to follow Jesus' example. This is not a suggestion. It is our calling. **Second**, the reason we are called is that Jesus suffered for us. We would like to think we are always the victim, never the offender; never the ones who return evil for good. But as part of this sinful human race, Jesus treated us well; how did we treat him?

Mankind killed Jesus and we are part of that. We might as well have been part of the crowd who shouted, *"His blood be on us and on our children."* (Matthew 27:25) That's us. **Third**, in this he provides an example. The Greek word for "example" is literally *a writing template for children*. Remember these (see below)?



I hated these and if you see my handwriting you'll know it. Jennifer has beautiful handwriting. What would we do in elementary school? We would trace these letters. The template of the perfect letter helped us learn how to shape our own letters. That's the Greek word.

Peter is saying that the way Jesus responded to unjust treatment provides a template for us to respond when people mistreat us.

What Jesus Didn't Do

This whole section is quoting or referring to Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53 is one of the most famous chapters in the Old Testament as it prophecies about a coming Suffering Servant. It is so eloquent that an evangelistic ministry to Jews headed by members at Bethel, will simply ask Jews on the street to read Isaiah 53 and ask them who it describes. For the sake of our time and the big theme Peter has for us, I won't spend time doing a comparison, but it certainly is noted.¹

"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." (1 Peter 2:22-23)

There are four things Jesus didn't do even when he was hanging on the cross. All of these are our natural sinful responses. He didn't do any of them.

Sin

He didn't respond sinfully. Here is an overall summary. He didn't act out of self-interest or self-protection. There wasn't any carnality, pride, ego, or selfishness in his response.

Deceive

"Neither was deceit found in his mouth." (Verse 21) When a relationship is undermined by betrayal or you find someone lying about you, it feels morally justified to return in kind. "You lie about me? Well then, two can play that game." Our sense of moral equivalency is easily dragged down to the level of the person lying to us or cheating us. We can think of

¹ All four verses in this section are dependent on Isaiah 53. Verse 22 quotes Isa. 53:9, and verse 23 apparently alludes to Isaiah 53:7. Verse 25 echoes Isaiah 53:6. Similarly verse 24 includes not exact quotations but words and phrases drawn unmistakably from Isaiah 53:12. (Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 129)

the treachery of Judas or Peter lying and saying he didn't know Jesus. Jesus refused to let the deceitful actions of others set the moral tone for his own.

Slander

"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return." (Verse 23) In Jesus' life, he was slandered and falsely accused of being born illegitimately, of plotting to overthrow Rome and be king, of demon possession, blasphemy, and mental derangement.

Were any of those true? No. Here is a huge difference. We slander people by making false or damaging accusations about others. Jesus wouldn't have to make anything up; he could just speak what he knows to be true in our hearts and lives. But he didn't slander with untruths and he didn't destroy with actual truths. He didn't return in kind.

Threaten

"When he suffered, he did not threaten." (Verse 23) Threats may be the easiest and most natural of all. We may threaten violence, lawsuit, blackmail, withdrawal of relationship, removal of financial support, exposure, etc. All of these are intended to suppress the other person and stop the suffering they are causing to us.

Let's look at that list. If we are to follow the lines of Jesus' example, are we doing the things Jesus didn't do? Might God be pricking your conscience right now with things that you have done or are doing to fight back against someone oppressing you? Jesus is our example to follow. Jesus didn't retaliate against those who unjustly caused him to suffer in spite of the fact that he is the only perfect person who has ever lived. He is the only one who has a right to be judge and jury against us. He alone has the moral authority to pronounce and to punish.

And consider the infinite resources at his disposal if he wanted to retaliate. Imagine the retaliatory response Jesus could have brought to bear on Pilate for sentencing him to death. Ten million nuclear bombs dropped right on Pilate's head and that's just the tiniest fraction of the power at his disposal. But he didn't. Not even one nuclear bomb. In fact, he was largely silent throughout all of his suffering. He didn't defend himself. He didn't correct their lies. He didn't cry out for justice.

That doesn't seem fair, does it? *If I do that, people will take advantage of me. If I do that, people will get away with it. If I do that, it wouldn't feel right. That's not how I was raised.*

What Jesus Did

Entrusted the wrong to God

"But continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." (Verse 23) Jesus "continued to entrust" himself to God. Notice this is not a one-time action but an ongoing activity. He continued to do this. Over and over. What did he do?

The word here means, *to hand something over*. Here is the action. I have something; now I give it to you. By giving it to you, I'm not responsible for it anymore. It's like I don't need to worry about it anymore. Why? Because it's out of my hands now. It's not my responsibility. I don't have to feel the need to make it right. "Jesus kept 'handing over' to God every dimension of his life, including the fate of his enemies." (Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude*, p. 144).

What did Jesus do when Judas came walking to Gethsemane with the mob to arrest him? Kiss him on the cheek? How would you feel to be betrayed in such fashion? What might you want to do as Judas leaned in for the kiss? Pow! Only as God, POW!!! Talk about injustice. Jesus felt the emotion—the same emotion as us, same sense of betrayal—but he did not retaliate. Instead, he gave that wrong to God. Is this some kind of mind game?

No, look at the rest of the phrase, *"to Him who judges justly."* (Verse 23) Here is the absolute key. Jesus' holy character did not allow any sin to go unpunished. No sin ever will. Hear me. Nobody gets away with anything! There is payday someday. Every sin will be paid for. God's holiness and justice require that every wrong against his holy character will have its just punishment. As Hebrews reminds us, *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."* (Hebrews 10:31)

Jesus knew that. Jesus knew hades and hell. Jesus knew the absolute justice of God. Jesus had full confidence in his heavenly Father's commitment to punish fully and eternally every wrong, every sin, every violence, every betrayal, every unjust suffering. That confidence in the justice of God freed Jesus from seeing his personal need to right every wrong. Rather, He knew God the Father had his back. He would take care of it. Paul picks up this point in Romans 12:19—*"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"*

When does God pay back the wrong? Some of it he builds into this world. The reward for sin is the consequence of sin. Or as we have said, *We don't break the Ten Commandments; they break us.* The person who is sinfully wronging us is living a broken and selfish life. It has its own bitter rewards.

Primarily though, this is in the future. Nobody gets away with anything. There is a coming judgment from God in which every injustice done will be punished. Severely. Eternally. Jesus knew this. He didn't need to punish Judas or Caiaphas or the Roman legion or Pilate or whoever goes down in history as actually driving the nails through his hands. God's got it. Instead, what did he do? He consciously handed that offense over to his Father.

So if right now we could peer into hell and see Hitler, Judas, Mao, Stalin, Dahmer, and the 9/11 murderous terrorists, and we were asked after seeing their present condition, "Did they get away with it?" We would say, "No way."

You may say, *They were unbelievers. But there's no condemnation for Christians. What if the people wronging me are Christians? They don't go to hell. And yet they have done this or that, aren't they getting away with it?* Here is Peter's response: *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."* (1 Peter 2:24)

This sobering verse tells us what happens to unjust suffering caused by fellow believers. The *tree* highlights the Old Testament statement that *"a hanged man is cursed by God."* (Deuteronomy 21:23) Jesus was cursed for us. His body became the spiritual reservoir containing the guilt of our sins. He bore those himself.

"By his wounds." (1 Peter 2:24) The KJV says, *"by his stripes"* you have been healed. Each of these clauses emphasizes that the one who had committed no sin was made sin for us; our atoning substitute. The one who had committed no crime was made the criminal for us. The one who had not caused a single unjust suffering himself suffered the guilt for the unjust pain inflicted by other Christians.

So we discover that all the wrongs done by anyone against anyone are made right. Where? For unbelievers, *in hell*. For believers, *on the cross*. Since I am myself a transgressor and my guilt is part of what he bore, now I can see other peoples' wrongs against me as no worse than any wrong I have done against God. "The suffering of Christ was the recompense of God on every hurt I have ever received from a fellow Christian." (John Piper, *Future Grace*, p. 268)

Was Jesus' death for that wrong sufficient for what Tom did to me? Was Jesus' death on the cross a sufficient payment for the sin that Jane did against me? Or must I add to the punishment by retaliating; by taking matters into my own hands? Was the cross sufficient payment or not?

The Christian response to injustice is to let God take care of it. Hell or cross. Either way, it's out of my hands and I am emotionally detaching myself from bitterness, anger, and revenge. God's got it. Now I am free to do the most counter-intuitive response.

Love and Do Good to People Who Mistreat Us

Where is that in the text? What did Jesus display for us on the cross? Love. We mistreated him. He continued to love us. We abused him. He died in our place. We slandered him. He said, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" (Luke 23:34) Do you see how Jesus gives us an example of loving our enemies? On the cross that's how he treated us.

I've been thinking about application in my own life. As a pastor, there are frustration points where maybe a family you've loved, married, buried their family member, or been with at the hospital, suddenly leaves the church critical of the parking lot layout or some small thing. You made a huge investment in their lives and then they're gone. Sometimes they leave ugly. That doesn't seem fair.

As a husband, I find one of the challenges of marriage is when things don't seem fair. Those moments when I do something in love and it goes unnoticed. I find myself fishing for acknowledgment, *Honey, the house looks pretty good doesn't it?* Or the thousand examples in the course of time where humans pick up these little offenses against each other: the unthoughtful word or too strongly stated opinion, and what do you do with them? Be offended? Be mad forever? Refuse to forgive? Peter puts forward a much better way—look back to the cross and see a bloodied Savior gasping for air, feeling the guilt of my sin. And from that cross-ward perspective, hand that offense, as real and unjust as it is, over to God and trust his ability to make it right.

Big and small. The forward and the backward look. Trusting God to be the judge and freeing my hands to do good even to my enemies. This is how we trace the example of Jesus. May we all "*follow in his steps.*" (1 Peter 2:21)

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