Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A patient in hospital accidentally knocked over a cup of water, which spilled on the floor. And afraid that he might slip on the water if he got out of the bed, he pressed the nurse call bell and a nurse came. Well, the nurse looked at the spill and called for an orderly to come and mop it up, because she had more important things to do. Now, the patient didn't know this, but hospital policy said that small spills were the responsibility of orderlies while large spills were to be mopped up by the hospital's maintenance crew. So, the orderly came in and looked at the puddle and decided that it was a large spill and called the maintenance department. But when the man from maintenance arrived, he looked at the spill and started arguing with the orderly about who should clean it up: "It's not my responsibility," said the orderly, "because it's a large puddle." But the maintenance man did not agree. "Well, it's not mine," he said, "the puddle is too small." And so, hearing this go on for some time, the exasperated and embarrassed patient reached out and knocked the whole jug of water on the floor, and said, "Does that help?"

And the reason that I have shared this humourous story is that it illustrates a reality of so much of life today. Two words that both begin with the letter ‘R’ are **rights** and **responsibilities**. And which one do you think gets all the attention today? It’s rights, isn’t it. The first thought of the nurse and the orderly and the maintenance worker was not taking responsibility but, ‘I know my rights; that’s not my job!’ And we see this all over the place today; we live in a culture that is obsessed with rights – human rights, equal rights, LGBQT rights, indigenous rights, reproductive rights, worker’s rights, refugee rights, migrant rights, student’s rights, criminal’s rights even … and the list grows longer every day. And the moment someone thinks that their rights are being infringed, they protest, or start a petition or a Facebook group, or get on TV news, or go on strike, or riot, or all the above.

And of course, this fascination with our rights starts at a young age. Very early on we develop sensitive ‘rights antennae,’ and we are so quick to complain about having to do the dishes when it is not our turn, or having to clean up one more block than our brother or sister has done. Three words that all of us surely often think or say are “that’s not fair!” And we think or say this because we know our rights.

Well, we are continuing in the part of Peter’s letter where he is getting into the nitty gritty of what keeping our conduct honourable among unbelievers looks like. And last week we saw what that looks like in terms of our attitude towards the government. But the next area of life that Peter addresses is the workplace. And what we have here is **Peter’s Program for Workplace Evangelism**. And by way of a spoiler, if we were to sum it up, it would be **Be Prepared to Take an Undeserved Beating for the Sake of the Gospel!**

And we will see this as we consider the two major parts of this passage – the **God-ordained Method** of Workplace Evangelism and the **Christ**-**Focused** **Motive** for Workplace Evangelism.

1. So, first of all, from verses 18-20, the **God-ordained Method** of Workplace Evangelism.
   1. And Peter addressed these words to “*servants*.”
      1. And the Greek word he used literally means **household servant**. And household servants washed dishes, cleaned, did the gardening or farming, or were even the family doctor or lawyer; the term covers a whole range of skills and jobs.
      2. But most commonly these people were **slaves** of the master of the house, which is why the NIV uses the word “slaves” here. And slaves were the vast majority of the Roman workforce. Some people voluntarily became slaves to secure steady employment or to pay off debts, but most were born into slavery. And some slaves were well looked after and even considered a part of the family, but many were treated very poorly.
      3. But as a slave, you were the **property** of the master; he owned you. And slaves had few, if any, rights. One Roman nobleman of the time said that the only difference between a slave and a cart is that the slave can talk.
      4. And we know that there were **many slaves in the early church**. In **1 Corinthians 1:26**, Paul says, “*For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth*.” Understandably, the gospel had great appeal to those who held low positions in society. The truth that all human beings are made in the image of God and are of equal worth and value in His sight was appealing. The hope of eternal life beyond the sadness and hurts of this world was appealing. And being a part of a community where everyone was of equal standing was wonderful.
      5. But **these truthes also created some problems**, which is why the relationship between slaves and masters receives quite a lot of focus in the New Testament. You see, believing slaves assumed that because they were free in Christ, they also had a right to freedom from their masters, especially if their masters were Christians.
         1. And that is a big part of what the **Book of Philemon** is about. Onesimus was a slave of Philemon. But Onesimus had run away because he thought he shouldn’t have to stay a slave. However, in **1 Corinthians 7:20-21**, Paul says, “*Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can [legitimately] gain your freedom, [then do so]*.” So, Paul was returning Onesimus to Philemon, because what Onesimus had done was wrong. But Paul also appealed to Philemon to forgive Onesimus and he even offered to pay for any costs that Philemon had occurred. But runaway slaves was a big problem in the early church.
         2. Another problem was that you could end up with a slave who was an elder in the same congregation that his master was a member of. And as you can imagine, that made for a complicated and dynamic set of roles to navigate!
   2. So, as we have seen, many slaves just assumed that Christianity would support and even encourage a slave uprising. But instead, the consistent message of the New Testament is what we read here: “*Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect.”* So, the fundamental attitude of the servant was to be submission and respect towards their master.
      1. And look at the additional instructions: “*And not only to the good and gentle but* ***also to the unjust***.” So, it was to be an **unconditional** submission. It was not submit if you had a kind master who treated you well, but submit even if your master was not kind and did not treat you well.
      2. In fact, as Peter continues, “*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*.” In other words: Of course you will get a whipping when you goof up; that’s obvious! But if you really want to honour the Lord, be prepared to take a whipping when you do not deserve it. And if you will pardon the pun, that is hard-hitting instruction, isn’t it!
      3. **Romans 12:14-21** says, “*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them … 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." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*.” And here in 1 Peter, this principle is applied to slaves.
      4. And we have **examples** **of this way of living in the Bible**:
         1. Earlier in the service, we read about the **little slave girl** **of Naaman’s house**. She had been carried away from Israel after a Syrian raid. Can you imagine that? A little or very young girl, who had perhaps been separated from her whole family, who had perhaps suffered in other awful ways. And then she learned that her mistress’s husband had leprosy. So, just try and put yourself in her shoes for a moment. What would you have thought or done? Might you have thought, I hope you die a slow painful death! But that is not what she did, is it; she pointed him to the prophet of the Lord who could heal.
         2. And think also of **David** when Saul was king. David was a servant in Saul’s house. He played the harp to soothe Saul. And he did nothing to offend Saul. But what did Saul do? He tried to kill David with his spear, three times! And then, when David had the opportunity to kill Saul, which everyone else was encouraging him to do as a totally justifiable act, and which, if I am being honest, I think I would have done, David refused to do it for the Lord’s sake. Instead, he showed great kindness to Saul.
2. Well, there is an even greater example of this way of living in the Bible. And it is there that Peter directs our attention in the second part of this sermon, as we consider the **Christ-focused Motive** for Workplace Evangelism. And we see this in verses 21-25.
   1. Back in verse 19, Peter said that when servants, “*mindful of God* [or for the Lord’s sake], *endure sorrow while suffering unjustly,*” this “***is a gracious* thing**.” The NIV says that it is “*commendable*.” The New American says it “*finds* *favour*.” And another English version says that it “*pleases God*.” So, our motivation to endure unjust treatment is knowing that it pleases the Lord.

* 1. And why this pleases the Lord is explained at the beginning of verse 21: “*For to this you have been* ***called***.” So, this is not some optional extra in the Christian life; it is our calling!
     1. I am going to give you a fill in the gap exercise. Jesus said, “*If anyone would come after me, let him* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_” Did He say, “Let Him get ready for a life of comfort and ease?” Did He say, “Let Him get ready to always be treated fairly and to have his rights respected? No. He said, “*Let Him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*.”
  2. And if we are in any way unsure about what denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Jesus ***in the workplace*** looks like, Peter spells that out for us as **verse 21** continues: “*Because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in His steps*.”
     1. Boys and girls, have you ever followed Dad on the beach and tried to walk in his footsteps? Well, with these words we are being told that the ‘footsteps’ that Jesus left for us to walk in are the footsteps of submission to injustice.
     2. And to help paint that picture Peter borrows heavily from the language of **Isaiah** **52**-**53** where Jesus is spoken about as the Suffering servant.
        1. **Verse 22** is a quote from Isaiah 53:9: “*He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth*.” So, even though He did not deserve it, Jesus was punished.
        2. **Verse 23** refers to Isaiah 53:7 and the prophecy that Messiah would not open His mouth and defend Himself when He was oppressed and afflicted. And this is exactly what Jesus did, choosing instead to trust in God as the one who would judge His oppressors.
        3. **Verse 24** is a quote from Isaiah 53:5: “*By His wounds you have been healed*.” And let’s think about His wounds for a moment.
           1. Back in verse 20, Peter said that slaves must be willing to endure an unjust beating for the sake of the Lord. Well, the word Peter used for “beating” literally means “to be struck by a fist.” It is the same word used in **Matthew 26:67** to describe the highly illegal beating that Jesus was given in His trial before the Jewish council.
           2. And as part of His trial before Pilate, we are told that even though Pilate declared Jesus innocent of any crime, three times! he still had Him “scourged” or whipped. And this was done with a whip of leather cords to which were attached pieces of lead or brass, or small, sharp pointed bones. And this whip would literally tear away hunks of flesh and expose veins, muscles, and even the internal organs.
           3. And then there was the horrific crown of thorns that was pressed on His head.
           4. And then there were the nail wounds in His hands and feet, and the spear thrust in His side.
           5. And all of this was necessary for Him to secure our salvation. All of this is how those who “*were like straying sheep have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls*.”
     3. Now, those of you who are studying the Psalms in the Fellowship Groups will have learned that **the centre a Psalm** is often the key to understanding or interpreting the Psalm. And this is a feature of Hebrew poetry. Well, Peter was a good Hebrew. And we are at the centre of his letter. And it comes as no surprise that the heart of all his instructions about how believers ought to behave in their different relationships is the cross of Jesus Christ!
        1. How could slaves endure unjust suffering? Only if they trusted in Christ and knew that their Father in heaven had an eternal inheritance set aside for them, and if they understood that they were called to imitate Christ.
        2. And it is the same for Christians being persecuted by the government, or wives with unbelieving and maybe even unkind husbands.
        3. We are not to be people who always demand our rights, and rebel against authority or take revenge when we are mistreated. We are to be those who imitate Christ.
  3. And in case you are still thinking, surely not, Pastor!? Surely this is just figurative language, isn’t it? Surely we shouldn’t have to put up with injustice? Then listen to these words of Paul from **1 Corinthians 4:10-13**, where he describes himself and his fellow missionaries: “*For Christ's sake … we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things*.” And in **2 Corinthians 11:23-27**, Paul said that the proof of his being an apostle compared with some who claimed to be apostles was that he had endured “*far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death*.” So, this is not figurative language; this is a call to be prepared to endure even undeserved beatings like Christ did.
  4. Now, none of us here today are actual slaves. It might feel like it sometimes and we might joke about it, but we are free. And it was only a couple of months ago that we considered the rules for slavery in Leviticus 25. And I made some comments then about the Bible’s acceptance of slavery and why we ought to support continued efforts to end things like slavery and sex-trafficking today. So, I won’t repeat those comments today.
  5. But the obvious application of the instructions in this passage is the workplace. And here are some principles that will help us think this through our duty in the workplace as followers of Christ:
     1. First, we are to be “***mindful of God***.” So, our first thought in all workplace matters must be God and His commands and the example of Christ. I know it has been abused as a slogan, but the basic idea of asking, What did Jesus do? is a good one. What does God command me to do in this situation?
     2. Second, following the trajectory of this passage, the employer is the superior and employees are the inferiors. So, it is th**e duty of employees to abide by the conditions of our employment**. We are under obligation to do the work we are expected to do for the wages we are given. And for the sake of our witness to Christ, we should want it to be that our employer values our work and sees that we are honest and hard-working. So, our first focus should not be our rights but our responsibilities.
     3. Third, this attitude should **not be conditional** on the employer being a nice person.
     4. Fourth, when we endure hardship and even injustice from our employers, refusing to retaliate, for the Lord’s sake, **this pleases Him**.
     5. And fifth, there are other places in Scripture that deal with the responsibilities of employers. And there are many other places in Scripture that attack injustice of every kind. So, we may make use of lawful avenues for redress of injustice, whether that be a union or an ombudsmen or a disputes tribunal, etc. And ultimately, we are not slaves, so we are free to leave one job and seek another.

But we are called, first, to submission, to responsibility, to trusting in the sovereignty of God, and to imitate Christ, for the sake of the gospel. God does not want us to be viewed as minimal workers and troublemakers and complainers. As one commentator put it, “It is ultimately far more important to God that believers demonstrate their submission to His sovereignty in every area of life than that they protest against problems in their workplace.”

You see, brothers and sisters, problems in the workplace are opportunities for spiritual growth and evangelism. We are here to glorify God and to win the lost for Christ. So, let us be prepared to suffer with the right attitude, knowing that in so doing we are treading in the footprints of Christ, and that one day He will honour us for choosing this pathway. Amen.