CHRISTIAN SUBMISSION

1 Peter 2:11–3:7

Key Verse: 2:21

“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”

Do you ever hate your situation? It could be at school, at work, or at home. These should be places where we feel respected and nurtured, but sometimes they can be places of great suffering. We may want to lash out, demonstrate in the streets, rebel or escape. But today Peter tells us that wherever our suffering may be, we should submit to it. That’s not a popular message. Why do we have to submit? Peter says it’s because it’s what our Lord Jesus did. Jesus set us such an amazing example, and he calls us to follow him. Peter also says that how we live in real life situations can help the people around us to believe. May God open our hearts and help us really accept his living word today.

Let’s read verses 11,12. These verses serve as a bridge between the first part of the letter and the main part. Peter urges us here, as God’s holy people, to keep up our spiritual struggle. He again calls these people, and all Christians, “foreigners and exiles” (1:1,17). It’s because, in a fundamental way, this world is not our home; our real citizenship is in heaven (Php3:20). And, as Christians, just as we need to learn to live in God’s eyes, in reverent fear of him, we also need to be aware that the people around us are watching, too.

These verses also tell us something about the nature of Christian life. We would love it if believing in Jesus instantaneously took away all our sinful desires. But it never works that way. Even after receiving his grace, our sinful nature doesn’t go away. It’s popular to blame our bad behavior on our situation, but really the problem is within ourselves. If we give in to our own sinful desires, it’s no one’s fault but our own, we become hypocrites, and we disgrace the name of Jesus we claim to believe in. But if we abstain from our sinful desires, we become people of integrity who please God and whom others can trust. “Abstain” means to choose not to, to refuse to give in. God’s grace teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions (Tit2:12). We want to “have it all,” to enjoy both the grace of Jesus and our sinful desires. But again, it never works that way. The world is always urging us to give in, to go with the flow, to indulge. God, on the other hand, is always reminding us to abstain from our sinful desires. If we’re really going to follow Jesus, the first, basic thing we have to do is deny ourselves, our sinful nature with all its passions and desires (Mk8:34; Gal5:24).

But we can’t just live in a constant state of saying no. Our Christian struggle has a positive direction, too. Read verse 12 again. Here, “such good lives” is literally “beautiful behavior.” Peter repeats these words several more times in this letter (3:1,2,16). What is “ugly behavior”? It’s being proud, selfish or lazy, just to name a few. But as Christians we’re called to beautiful behavior. We can’t just do it once in a while, when we feel like it, and we can’t fake it; it has to be turned on 24/7; it has to come from who we are, from our hearts, and we have to be eager about it (Tit2:14). It’s appealing to anybody, regardless of generation, race or religion. It takes time to notice and recognize, but if we’re faithful, beautiful behavior eventually has an impact. Basically Peter is encouraging us to engage in lifestyle evangelism wherever we are: at work, at school or at home. It’s like the famous saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” When people see Christ-like behavior in us, it leads them not to us, but to God, to glorify him.

Now in verse 13 Peter turns to the main subject of his letter. He’s mainly writing about suffering. The word “suffer” in some form is repeated 18 times in five chapters (1:6,11; 2:19–21,23; 3:14,17,18; 4:1,13,15,16,19; 5:1,9,10). Peter urges us, as Christians, to suffer! But it’s not just any kind of suffering; it’s suffering for doing good (2:20; 3:17). To Peter, this is “beautiful behavior.” In today’s passage this suffering is mainly in the form of submission. So here Peter repeats the word “submit” four times (2:13,18; 3:1,5). Submitting to others is hard. It seems quiet, but the suffering involved in submitting can be very intense.

What’s the first kind of submission Peter urges us to do? Read verses 13,14. Clearly, Christians can’t run away from society, separate themselves from it or despise it. When Christianity was first getting started, people misunderstood that Jesus was a political rebel against Rome, and so were his followers. Many thought Christians claimed absolute freedom in Christ. Peter wanted believers to correct those misunderstandings. So did Paul (Ro13:1–7). But submitting to political leaders may seem distant to us. We rarely, if ever, encounter a political leader personally. And elections come soon enough, so if we don’t like them we can vote them out of office. How do we actually submit to them? Read verse 17. We submit by showing proper respect, and by honoring our top leader, in our case, the President. Showing respect or honor can be a real struggle, especially when the person doesn’t seem worthy of it. But Peter says in verse 13 to do it “for the Lord’s sake.” What does he mean? Mainly he means so that Jesus might be seen and known in and through us. We are free in Jesus, but we freely submit to human authorities for his sake, as God’s slaves.

Next, Peter turns to the foundation of human society, the household. Read verse 18. Here, “slaves” literally means “household servants”—in today’s culture it could mean those hired to do housecleaning, babysitting, construction or other chores. It can also mean those who earn their living by working at a company for a boss. Peter says to submit to these employers “in reverent fear of God.” Today we live in what one author calls a “Culture of Complaint” (Robert Hughes). People complain about everything and everyone, especially their employers. But Christians are called to live in reverent fear of God, not in complaint, and we bring that reverence for God into our real lives, especially our workplaces. We need to learn to respect and honor not only our political leaders, but also those who pay us for our services. It’s not being dumb; it’s the “beautiful behavior” Peter is teaching. We show our reverence for God by submitting to our employer.

Peter knows that some of them are “good and considerate” and some are “harsh,” but he says to submit, regardless. Why? Read verse 19. Here in Greek the word “commendable” is literally “grace,” and it’s the same in verse 20. “Grace” means it’s “beautiful” to God. We bear up under the pain of unjust suffering because we’re conscious of God. Peter’s going to say more about that later. But here, he’s speaking to servants or workers who bear with unjust treatment because they’re aware of God wherever they are. They bear it because they’re trying to please God. It’s a painful submission, but it reveals God’s grace. In verse 20 Peter is “keeping it real.” Often in life, we’re suffering because we ourselves did wrong. Even in those cases, we still try to escape our suffering, justify ourselves or complain about it. It’s really ugly. If we swallow that suffering as our just punishment, there’s nothing especially beautiful about it. But as Christians if we submit to unjust suffering and keep doing good, it’s beautiful.

Why? Read verse 21. Jesus is our great example. And what was his example? He suffered! Peter repeatedly tells us in this letter how Jesus suffered (1:11; 2:21,23; 3:18; 4:1,13; 5:1). He describes it here. Read verses 22,23. Jesus was the only human who was completely innocent. Yet he was insulted and made to suffer greatly. He was despised and rejected and treated like a criminal. His was the greatest injustice ever suffered. And how did he react to it? He didn’t retaliate; he didn’t make any threats. He was as quiet as a lamb led to the slaughter. How hard it is for us to hold our tongues and remain quiet! How could Jesus do that? It says “he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” He believed that God is alive, he sees everything, and in the end, his righteous justice will prevail. This is what it means to be “conscious of God.” To submit to unjust suffering, we need the faith of our Lord Jesus.

In these verses Peter is quoting several times from Isaiah 53, which is prophecy about a suffering servant of the Lord. God would use him to forgive his people’s sins. Read verse 24. On the cross Jesus was bearing our sins in his own body. It was to take the punishment we deserve (Isa53:5). But it was more. Peter says it was so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. It was to change us at our core, to change our desires, what we want. Because of what Jesus suffered for us, now we no longer want sin; we want righteousness. We want to please God. We want to be more like God who gave us such amazing grace. Peter, quoting Isaiah, says, “by his wounds you have been healed.” When he was crucified Jesus was badly whipped, actually physically nailed down, and pierced in his side. His wounds were all over his body, from head to toe. His wounds were so painful and so unjust. And yet it says that by his wounds we are healed. His wounds heal us of all our sin-sicknesses, our rebellion, our hatred and bitterness, our doubt of God’s love. His wounds change us into very different, beautiful people. In verse 25 Peter says we were like sheep going astray, but now we have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. This Jesus is still our Shepherd and Overseer. We can still trust him and know that he cares and understands and can help us through any kind of suffering. We think about ourselves far too much, and about Jesus far too little. But the more we reflect on him, especially his suffering, even in our day to day struggles, we can be transformed more and more into his beautiful image.

Next Peter turns other people who typically endure much unjust suffering: wives. Look at 3:1. He’s referring not just to wives in general, but especially to Christian wives who have unbelieving husbands. It’s so hard to stay married to such men, but Peter urges Christian women to do so. Why? Read verses 1,2. He’s again describing a beautiful life. It’s in pure and reverent behavior. It’s so appealing and heart-moving, even a hard-hearted man can be won over by it. Peter says more. Read verses 3,4. Outward beauty tends to be gaudy and expensive. But inner beauty is genuine, free of charge, and God highly values it. Also, it’s “unfading,” meaning it’s wrinkle-proof. What is inner beauty? Peter says it’s “a gentle and quiet spirit.” It’s gentle and quiet even in the midst of harsh suffering and loud yelling. It’s the image of our Lord Jesus himself. He said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt11:29). It should be the aim not only of women but also of men to learn the gentle, humble heart of our Lord Jesus. He’s our role model. He’s our best example. He’s the one who makes us truly beautiful or handsome. We cultivate this inner self only as we stay focused on him, remember his grace, his suffering, his most beautiful example, and learn to submit to whatever and whomever in our lives. In verses 5,6 Peter gives the example of Sarah who submitted to Abraham and called him her lord. Women can be fearful when their husbands are violent and scary, but they should keep doing right and not give way to fear. This is also part of their submission.

Finally Peter mentions husbands’ submission. Read verse 7. The key words here are “be considerate” and “treat them with respect.” These are much harder for husbands to do than it may seem. But if husbands focus on Christ, they can become much better husbands to their wives. There’s a warning here, too. God hears the prayers only of husbands who are considerate and respectful of their wives.

Let’s read 2:21 again. May God help us to see his gracious calling to us personally to follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus. May God show us how to submit like him and suffer for doing good like him, so that we may live beautiful lives that glorify God and draw others to Jesus.