

April 13, 2008
Easter 4

"How Our Shepherd's Love Helps Us Handle Injustice"

1 PETER 2:19-25

For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. ²⁰ But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The word "want" is an old English word that means "lack nothing." You lack nothing because the Lord your shepherd will be there with you when you walk through the door of death, and he will also be there for you when you face challenges in your life.

This morning we want to focus on the serious challenge of dealing with injustice. Peter is writing this letter to Christians who lost their homes and jobs just because they were Christian. In the words just read to you he is focusing specifically on Christian slaves who suffered dual unfair treatment because they were slaves and because they had become Christian.

You cannot make it through this life without have to deal with some form of injustice. We assume that if we do our jobs well, we will be rewarded with higher pay or even a promotion in responsibility, but it does not always work that way does it? We assume that if we eat right, do our exercises, and take our vitamins we will always be health, but it does not always work that way does it? We assume that if we teach our children God's Word that they will always be close to Jesus their Shepherd, but it does not always work that way does it? And yes, we assume that if we faithfully teach God's Word in this congregation and faithfully administer the Sacraments as they were given to us by loving Shepherd that he will allow us to see visible fruit from all our efforts in the lives of people in this community. But it does not always work that way does it?

I think I am safe in saying that one of greatest challenges you will face in life is dealing with this problem of injustice at various levels. That's why we need the love of Jesus our Good Shepherd. Injustice will come to us, but the love of Jesus our Shepherd will never fail us.

Injustice will challenge us

Peter writes, "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to you credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure." Peter is speaking to the Christian slaves. If you have your Bible with you, you could read the verse before this that says, "Slaves submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good, but also to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh."

It has been estimated that up to one third of the people living in the Roman Empire were slaves. Some of these slaves became Christians who were blessed to know how much love Jesus their Shepherd had for them. Peter does not encourage them to leave their masters, or link together to revolt against practice of slavery. He calls on them to remain in their station of life, witnessing to their Christian faith by their example, until the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ changed the hearts of their masters.

A Christian slave who received punishment for doing something wrong was certainly not giving a good witness to the love Jesus has for us by showing anger and hatred. It is certainly not a good witness to Jesus when Christians get reprimanded, punished, or even lose their job for doing something wrong and then cry out, "Injustice, foul, unfair" You cannot shake your fist at the CHP officer who gives you a ticket for driving a 100 miles per hour on the freeway and cry out unfair. If I take a hammer and deliberately smash my finger several times I dare not brag and say, "I really served the Lord by not getting mad when my finger hurt badly." I am just getting what I deserve for my foolishness. As we are told in Galatians, "We reap what we sow. If we sow to destruction, we will reap destruction."

What if the CHP officer writes you a ticket for going 66 miles an hour and totally ignores a whole string of cars going over 80 MPH? How do you handle such injustice? How do you handle being a Christian slave, and doing your job with a deep sense of loyalty to Jesus and your master beats you just because you are a slave and you love Jesus? Listen to what Peter says, "But if you suffer for doing good and you endure this, this is commendable before God." The word that is translated "commendable." Is the familiar word "charis" often translated "grace." "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind but now I see."

The Christian slaves knew the grace of God and the love of the Shepherd that rescued them. Even as they were being mistreated, they realized how much they were loved by Jesus and that nothing in all creation could ever separate them from the love of God that existed in Christ Jesus their Lord. Some of the most powerful witnesses to Jesus will take place when you endure times in your life when things don't seem fair and you are given more than you bear. It is from these deep, ugly, dark hours of life when others shake their fist at God, that the most glorious hymns of praise rise to the Lord. Such were the hymns of praise that came from the deep dungeon in Philippi where Paul and Silas were thrown after they had been severely beaten. "About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."

How do we handle injustice when it comes to us? Where do we go for examples to guide us? Oh, we can point to Christian slaves who witnessed to their masters in the Roman Empire, or Christian slaves in our country who gave us such a powerful witness to their faith with such spiritual songs as "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, No body knows

but Jesus." We can point to the Lutheran minister Richard Wurmbrand who reported to congress the terrible abuses Christians were undergoing in communist Romania in the 1950's and 60's. When they refused to believe his stories of being tortured in prison, this Lutheran minister took off his shirt and showed them the deep scars on this back. We can point to such examples of people to help us be more faithful in our witness, but the best example is our Lord Jesus.

"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps, 'He committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.'" A few years ago, people were wearing little bracelets that had these letters on them, "WWJD." That is a good question to ask in times of injustice, "What would Jesus do?" Here we have the answer. "He committed no sin and not deceit was found in his mouth." The word "deceit" has the thought of tricking someone to harm them. If you want to get even with someone, you can dream up all sorts of subtle ways to hurt them. Nothing of that was ever in the mind of Jesus. In fact Peter reminds us that when people hurled unfair insults and accusations against Jesus, he did not retaliate and he made no threats. Instead Peter reminds us that he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. Jesus had no anger or evil in his eyes, no bad words, and no malice in his heart against those who treated him unfairly especially as he was hanging on the cross. What a relief it is to follow in Jesus footsteps and trust that our heavenly Father will take care of those people who hurt us unfairly in his own good time. You know the old saying, "The wheels of God's justice grind slowly, but they also grind exceedingly fine." The Lord says, "Vengeance is mine and I will repay."

The famous London preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon once told the story of an American slave name Cuffy who was purchased at a slave auction by an evil master. The master was told Cuffy only had one bad habit and that was he prayed. The new master said that if he ever caught Cuffy praying, he would whip him. Every night Cuffy knelt in prayer to his heavenly Father, and one night the master caught him praying. He beat him severely. Talk about injustice. That night the master could not sleep, because he saw love in the eyes of Cuffy even when he was beating him. It haunted him severely. He woke up his wife and said, "Can you pray for me?" His wife said, "I don't know how to pray?" Then he took a lamp, went to the slave quarters and said to Cuffy, "My heart is troubled, will you pray for me?" Cuffy said, "Master ever since I came here I have not stopped praying for you." Taking his master's hand he began to pray, and witnessed to the love of Jesus our Shepherd who gave his life for us. When masters come to know the sacrificial love Jesus has for all people, they can't get rid of the slavery fast enough.

Our Shepherd's love will never fail us

Jesus sacrificed himself for sheep that love to wander, including our wandering into this land of whining and complaining about injustice. "He hit me first!" How many times have you heard children say this to their parents? You have been there and so have I. How could the Lord our God ever find it in his heart to forgive us for all the times we have whined and complained that things are not fair? Like the children of Israel we complain about manna from heaven and call it a loathsome food, craving the leeks and onions of Egypt. So what does our Shepherd do for us when we wander off on one of these pathetic pity party paths? He comes after us with his love.

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." Jesus bore our sins on his body on the tree. "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Everything I ever did wrong, including this awful times of life when we cry out unfair, all of it was placed on the body of Jesus. His body bore our sins and made the complete and total payment we need.

This past week we heard about a Navy Seal who was awarded posthumously the highest medal of honor. When terrorist monsters threw a grenade and it bounced off his chest, he instinctively landed on it to protect his buddies and keep them from dying. Our president was not able to give the award with shedding tears. Jesus did so much more for us. He bore our sins on his body on the tree, and now we are alive. We have eternal life waiting for us, we want to die to all sin, and we want to live under the unfailing love of the Shepherd. "For you were once like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. That allows us to say boldly and confidently, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Amen.