

1 Peter 2:18-25
(Isaiah 52:13-53:6; Matthew 20:20-28)
“Following Jesus”

Introduction

Without the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit within us, the particular verses we are studying this morning will only place us under guilt and bondage to an impossible ideal. But in the power of the Spirit, these verses become an incentive to move on into the life offered to us by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter uses the example of slavery in the Roman Empire to remind all believers, slave and free, that we may be called upon to suffer for the gospel, and that suffering itself can be what he twice refers to as “a gracious thing” (2:19&20) if that suffering comes, not as punishment for evil we have done, but for good we have done. In other words, if we suffer for living a derelict life, or are put in prison for doing violence or for stealing, then the suffering is just. God may still use it in our lives as loving discipline to bring us to repentance and reformation of life, but the suffering will be remedial rather than a sharing in the suffering of Christ. But when we suffer unjustly, when we lose friends for following Christ, when we are passed over at work because we are Christians, when we are mocked because we have sought to stand with the one whom we call Lord, then we have the privilege of sharing in Christ’s sufferings.

This morning, I would invite you to look at Jesus through Peter’s eyes, to think about this one whom we are called to follow, this one who has left us an example so that we might follow in his steps. Let’s ask ourselves what it might look like if more of us began to seek to live this new life in the power of the Spirit, living not for ourselves, but truly following the one who loved us and gave himself for us. Twice Peter says of such a life – even when it leads to suffering – “this is a gracious thing.” Wouldn’t we begin to turn our little worlds upside down? Would we not be used of God in ways we cannot now even begin to comprehend to transform our own circles of personal relationship?

Body

1. Following Jesus, God’s suffering servant.

The picture clearly comes from our first Scripture lesson, the suffering servant chapter of Isaiah 53, for Peter quotes the ninth verse, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” Some claim that this text is not about any individual but about the suffering nation of Israel, about God’s people in times of captivity. While it certainly is true that the people of God have suffered terribly and still do today in some parts of the world, nevertheless there is only one historical figure to whom these words apply so clearly that even those who do not believe in him immediately think of him when they hear these verses read.?

Francis Schaeffer's wife, Edith, has written of visiting a Jewish family and reading Isaiah 53 to the young men of the home without telling them what particular text they were hearing. She then asked them, "Who is this text describing?" Without hesitation they answered, "Jesus."

But how can we follow in Jesus' steps as suffering servants if he was, uniquely, God's suffering servant? The answer to that question is precisely what Peter has in view here: he tells us that when we suffer unjustly – in other words, when we suffer not for doing evil but for doing good – then we are granted the gracious gift of sharing in Christ's sufferings. The apostle Paul reminds us that it is those who share in "the fellowship of Christ's sufferings" who will also share in "the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:10-11). The one leads to the other.

In our culture we want to separate the two and to seek only pleasure. But following Jesus always comes with a cost, and Peter reminds us here that the price is well worth the honor of following our Master, as well as worth awaiting and one day tasting the joy that is set before us, a joy that Peter has already described as "joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1:8).

2. Following Jesus, God's perfect sacrifice.

Any view of the atonement that fails to grasp the sacrificial nature of Jesus' self-sacrifice has missed the heart of the gospel. Many teach that the atonement was simply an example of God's great love for us. It is important to note that here in the very place that Peter is emphasizing Christ as our example he underscores the vicarious, substitutionary nature of the atonement. Christ died in our place. The apostle Paul put it this way: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 3:21). Here, Peter writes, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (2:24).

But how can we possibly follow him in this way? Surely his sacrifice was utterly unique. Of course it was, as all the New Testament writers agree. Nevertheless, they call us to imitate the sacrificial nature of his life and death. This is one of the ways in which Peter calls us to "follow in his steps." Paul says this very same thing in writing to the Colossian Christians, stating this same truth even more strikingly as he describes his own ministry: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions ... to make the word of God fully known" (Colossians 1:24-25).

While we cannot atone for sins – our own or anyone else's – nevertheless, we are called to lay down our lives for one another and when we do, people see the incredible love of God for them and may be drawn to believe the gospel of grace. They see self-sacrificial grace and love made visible and tangible through our lives.

3. Following Jesus, God's wounded healer.

Sin has not only brought us under judgment, but it has wounded us, so that there is no health in us. The wound is many-faceted: relational, moral, physical. Christ came healing, and he sends us into the world, to use Henri Nouwen's wonderful phrase, as "wounded healers." Peter tells us here, "By his wounds you have been healed" (2:24).

You have heard, I'm sure, of Father Damien, a catholic priest from Belgium, who in the 1860s was sent to Hawaii. When he learned that the island of Molokai was being set apart as an isolation settlement for lepers, but that there was no one to care for them, he devoted his live to their service, serving as doctor, nurse, priest and servant. By the 1880s he had himself contracted the disease, and his ministry entered a whole new phase of power when in the chapel one day, he stood at the table and addressed the lepers with the words, "Fellow lepers."

It is only when we realize the depth of our own brokenness, and address broken people as having known for ourselves the healing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we can bring healing and hope to those who most need it.

4. Following Jesus, God's faithful shepherd.

We are not only born into the world wounded, but we awaken in the world lost. Even after we are found and rescued by God, we tend to wander off. Over and again the Scriptures use the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep to describe this tendency of God's people. Jesus speaks of himself as "the good shepherd who lays down his life the sheep," (John 10) and he tells the parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine and searches for the one lost sheep until he finds it. When he brings it home, there is rejoicing. So, Jesus said, there is more rejoicing in heaven over the return of one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who don't need to repent (Luke 15). Here Peter writes, "For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (2:25). Do we long for the lost in that way, or are we like the religious leaders who prompted the three parables in Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, lost son) by wondering why Jesus wasted his time with folk who had bad reputations?

In the final chapter of this letter, Peter will write, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you ... And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (5:1&4). I would suggest that the appeal goes to every Christian, not only to the elders, because Peter calls us all to follow in Jesus' steps, to take him as our great example. So he here addresses how we are to think

of our personal mission fields, those circles of relationship that he has entrusted to us in our homes, neighborhoods, places of work and play. You and I will be held accountable by the chief Shepherd for how faithfully we tend the flock that he has entrusted to us.

Conclusion

Many Christians have taken to the phrase, “What would Jesus do?” and for a time it was popular in some circles to wear wristbands inscribed with the letters, WWJD. What if more of us got it off our wrists and into hearts and minds and deeds, actually making it our steadfast intent to seek to follow in his steps? How would our families be transformed, our marriages strengthened, our businesses become more focused on what ultimately matters rather than merely on today’s bottom line? How might our community be transformed and the church more focused on advancing Christ’s Kingdom to the ends of the earth?

We have not only been shown the way, but have been given the very power of God to enter into and grow up into the life of Christ. “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” (2:21).

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