

In an Unjust World, Part 1

Early Christianity

By Bob Vincent

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Bible Text: 1 Peter 2:18-21, Philemon 10-16
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Robert Benn Vincent
80 Hickory Hill Drive
Boyce, LA 71409

Website: www.rbvincent.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/rbvincent

Well, I want to direct your attention here to 1 Peter 2 and we're going to look down at verse 18. This is a very controversial sermon today and I want you to pay a lot of attention to it because I'm going to address some issues that are vital that we understand. So I want us to look beginning at verse 18, 1 Peter 2:18, "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh or crooked or twisted." Crooked, twisted, mean, ornery masters. What in the world is the New Testament saying to us because I believe it's the key to understanding the whole of our relationship to authority in this world.

The first thing that we have to understand is that slavery has been around from time immemorial. We have to understand that. In the Old Testament slavery was regulated so that an Israelite could only serve for seven years and at the end of seven years that Israelite would be set free. Instead of prison which is, I guess, the closest thing to hell that you can find on earth, instead of prison in the Old Testament people paid off what they owed and if they couldn't pay, they became slaves for a season to pay that debt. When we come to the New Testament, we come to a phenomenon that was throughout the Roman Empire. And how is it dealt with. If you will bear with me to the end of this sermon, you will be convinced of what the Bible teaches about slavery, you will understand it, and you will be able to react to things accordingly.

So the first thing we have to understand is that slavery in the first century Roman world existed and the New Testament addresses itself in that context. It's neither, it's not saying that it's right, it's simply saying it exists, and so the New Testament letters where we read them addressed to slaves is giving slaves counsel and advice to stay out of difficulty. And so you see there he's saying in verse 18, Peter is, "Slaves, submit to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate," that is yielding, tolerant, kind, "but also to those who are harsh." That particular Greek word *scolios*, we have the idea of a crooked thing, a twisted thing, and so imagine having a twisted master. What do you do in such a situation? He's saying submit.

Now let's look at it practically. Did anyone here, is anyone here old enough to remember a movie that starred Kirk Douglas that was about a slave by the name of Spartacus? Do you know that the movie "Spartacus" is based on historical events, that there was a slave

uprising and Spartacus was a gladiator who led other gladiators to revolt? And they were victorious over the armies of Rome for quite a while until finally Rome organized itself and they wiped them out. And miles after miles after miles of people were crucified. They're wanting to know who is Spartacus, and according to what we know from history, various people said, "I am Spartacus. I am Spartacus." The point that you first of all have to deal with in the New Testament is it isn't endorsing a system, it's endorsing how do you survive under a system like this and survive.

Rome was powerful. Rome's armies crushed people and they through their Roman roads were able to transport people from one end to the other very quickly. I remember in the summer of 1966 hiking on Hadrian's Roman wall that kept the Barbarians that the Romans were never able to conquer, the Scots, kept the Barbarian Scots out of the Roman Empire. I remember hiking on that wall. Roman roads were developed so that the military could move quickly and could prevent the kind of thing that happened before the time of Christ in the uprising with Spartacus.

So the first thing is this: suicide is never an option for a believer. Suicide is never an option for a believer and so for a slave to engage in an uprising was, in effect, in Roman days, to commit suicide. You were going to be crushed. So how do you survive in a wicked system, in a wicked time when you have a master who may be good and kind as many Roman masters were, but when others were cruel, despotic, where you could be raped, where this could happen and that could happen, and all these horrible things? What do you do? Well, St. Paul has a remedy, excuse me St. Peter has a remedy but before we go there, I want us to look at St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7 because they help us to understand this. 1 Corinthians 7 and that's page 1779, and in 1 Corinthians 7:20 he says this, page 1779, "Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you, although if you can gain your freedom, do so."

So what's he saying? He said if you can get out of it, get out of it. But he said it's not the end of the world if you can't get out of it. How could he possibly say that? Don't we believe in liberty? Let me say something that's important and I'll address it again next week a little more forcefully as we think of the Fourth of July holiday. Liberty is not the goal of the human life, Christ is the goal of the human life. It's to glorify God and enjoy him forever. And let me say you can be the freest of all people in this world with no strings attached, no obligations whatsoever, and you can be the most miserable person in the world. What is the secret of happiness? The secret of happiness is knowing the Lord Jesus Christ, loving him, giving our rights way to him, laying everything we've got at his feet and praying and begging God that we would let our light so shine before men that they would see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. And so what Paul is saying in verse 21 of 1 Corinthians 7 is, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you." I'm not free. Don't let it trouble you.

Can Larry Coleman on the 28th day of June, 2020, in prison be happy? And if you tell me he can't be happy, then you're telling me that God isn't real. I want to tell you, I don't care where you are, what's going on in your life, you can be happy today. The secret of

happiness is surrender of everything to the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the secret of happiness.

So what Paul is saying there, "Were you called a slave? Don't let it trouble you." Freedom is not the goal of life. It's not Patrick Henry, "Give me liberty or give me death." Where did that come from? That came from pagan ideas about liberty. Liberty, true liberty is found at the foot of a cross. The person who is a slave to Christ is the freest of all people and those who are free but in rebellion against the Lord Jesus Christ are the most enslaved. They're enslaved to depression. They're enslaved to their possessions. They're enslaved to their sense of having rights and having this and their privileges and all of those things. So the secret of happiness is Christ, to know the Lord Jesus Christ, to love the Lord Jesus Christ, to give your life to him. That's the secret of happiness.

So he says, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you, although if you can gain your freedom do so." And then look at what he says in verse 22, "For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freed man." The Lord's freed man. Do you realize it's possible to be in prison and be a free person? Do you realize it's possible to be in the White House and be a slave? Do you realize it's possible to be the wealthiest man in the world and to be deeply depressed? Deeply in bondage? Because real slavery is slavery to sin which is always slavery to self, and so he's saying if you were called when you came to know the Lord Jesus Christ as a slave, he said, the Lord's freed man.

Notice the next clause, similarly he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. That's so important to remember. Then he says in verse 23, "You were bought with a price. You were bought at a price. Do not become slaves of men." In other words, slavery should be avoided but not at all cost. Do you know the story of the Moravian missionaries? You know, it's interesting that Count Zinzendorf, a pietist, inspired people to serve Christ as missionaries. The Moravians were wonderful missionaries and they reached out and there were some young men who wanted to reach out to the slaves, especially in the Caribbean. How did they do that? They had themselves sold into slavery. "Are you kidding me? They had themselves sold into slavery?" Yes, because they had a passion that those slaves would know the Lord Jesus Christ and they knew they had to be there with them and be on equal terms with them so they had themselves sold into slavery that they might minister. Because, after all, what does it profit a person if that person gains the whole world and loses his own soul? The Moravians believed that people who died without the Lord Jesus Christ were going to go to a place of conscious, unending torment and woe, a place that Jesus described as the outer darkness, a place that Jesus described using the imagery of the garbage dump of Jerusalem, the valley of the sons of Hinnom, Gehinnom, the lake of fire where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. What does that mean? Well, in the garbage dump sometimes they threw the bodies of those who were executed over the cliff into Gehenna, into the valley of the sons of Hinnom. What happens if you've swooned and you're thrown over the cliff and suddenly you come awake and you have broken bones and you cannot move? Well, you know one good thing, as the worms begin to gnaw you and the fire begins to burn you, you know that eventually the fire is going to burn out, you're going to die and the worms

will die too and you'll be dead. Jesus said hell is like that. It's like the valley of the sons of Hinnom, Gehenna, except the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. Is this a hellfire and damnation sermon? Well, no, not really. It's saying what could motivate two well-off, European, well-educated, young Christian men to have themselves sold into slavery so they would end up in the slave yards working on sugar plantations? They loved people. They loved people enough to sacrifice themselves that others would know the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the goal of life. That's the secret of happiness.

Verse 23, "You were bought at a price. Do not become slaves of men." Christ bought you. That's a beautiful picture, isn't it? You remember the prophecy of Hosea and his unfaithful wife ends up on an auction block and he buys her back? That's redemption and you and I were on the auction block of sin and slavery and death and Christ laid down his life for you and me and shed his precious blood that we would be ransomed and redeemed. We were bought with a price.

Verse 24, "Brothers, each man is responsible to God should remain in the situation God called him to." In other words, a fool's eyes are on the ends of the earth. "Oh, two years from now we're gonna do this and we're gonna do that. We're gonna have this, we're gonna have that." All you've got is today and if ever there was anything in the history of the world, it's the incredible, topsy-turvy, turned upside down world we find ourselves in now. We ought to remember what the Muslims remember when they say "Inshallah," God willing. That's what James tells us, "Go to now you who say today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city and buy and get gain." And he says, "You don't know, your life is a vapor. You ought to say if the Lord wills," in Arabia, inshallah. If the Lord wills. We're careless, we don't say it, if the Lord wills. Wow. If the Lord wills.

When we were together here last with my wife present on March 15, we had no idea that so much time would transpire, nor did we know that Texas would be in lockdown again. Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, San Antonio locked down again. Wow. We had no idea of the economic destruction would come in the wake of these things. "I've got a good job. Inshallah, God willing, I'm going to do this, do that." In a certain sense, the Bible is saying to us live for today because there's no other day you've got, but live for today for Jesus because that's the meaning of life, that's the heart of the matter. And so rather than fretting over what we don't have, even if we're a slave, he says live for the Lord. Use what you've got for his glory.

Now I want you to look at another word of Paul's found in Philemon and we discover in the book of Philemon the Bible's answer to slavery. The Bible's answer to slavery is found in the book of Philemon and it's interesting if you turn to page 1861, this short letter of St. Paul, he words it this way in verse 1 to Philemon, "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker." And notice at the end he speaks of the church that meets in his home. Remember they didn't have to worry about utilities and taxes and tax avoidance for a church building, or insurance, because the church was comprised of many house churches. Who knows whether that will be the situation in the future or not. I have no idea but I think we should look at ancient Christianity and see how it coped.

But listen to what he says. What has happened is there was a runaway slave. Look at the top of page 1861. "I appeal to you," verse 10, "for my son Onesimus who became my son while I was in chains." What happened? Somehow Onesimus came into contact with the Apostle Paul. Onesimus was a runaway slave and the Apostle Paul did what? He was so full of bitterness because he was in chains he couldn't even speak. No, he had joy. Did Paul have the joy of the Lord even in chains? Yes. Was Paul's life a lighthouse and a magnet that drew people to himself because Paul had something supernatural about him? Yes. And so this runaway slave meets the Apostle Paul in Rome and becomes a believer and that's how Paul puts it in verse 10, "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus," a runaway slave.

Now you know, the Old Testament forbade returning a slave to his master. Did you know that? Under Old Testament law, it was against Old Testament law to return a slave to his master. If you ever study the history of the United States, you see that our form of slavery in this country violated biblical standards on many fronts, and that was one of the fronts. But notice what Paul is doing. He's sending Onesimus back to his master. What? What's he doing? Onesimus has been born again. Born again. The new birth. Onesimus is a new man. Onesimus has become a Christian. Onesimus has come to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ. You can't make yourself be born again. It's a work of God's free and sovereign grace that he uses the proclamation of the Gospel to accomplish.

So Onesimus becomes born again. Have you ever thought about the worst things that ever happen in your life are part of a divine plan to put you in a place where you encounter people so that your life is changed? So Onesimus, a runaway slave, ends up in contact with the Apostle Paul and what does Paul do? Paul sends him back to his master. He wasn't forcing him to go back. Paul wrote a letter. This little letter of Philemon is the letter the Apostle Paul wrote to Onesimus' master.

Verse 11 with a play on words, "formerly he was useless to you but now he has become useful both to you and to me." He's become a useful person. He's become not a grudging slave but a man who actively wanted to work and do kind and good things and serve the Apostle Paul.

Now look at verse 12 and this is the New Testament's key to social change. Verse 12. The New Testament is not a book about revolution and violence and forcing our will on others. The method of changing society in the New Testament is reformatory, not revolutionary. Verse 12, "I am sending him who is my very heart back to you." Verse 13, "I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel." Verse 14, "But I did not want to do anything without your consent so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced." That's why I don't believe in manipulative giving. That's why I think that when a church sends out bills to people it's an abomination, even though we have bills we have to pay. Giving should always be spontaneous and from the heart because we've come to love the Lord Jesus Christ and love other people and we give out of gratitude, not out of duty. And that's what Paul is appealing to with his friend, Philemon.

"I want you to take him back." But notice how he says in verse 15, "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good." Look at verse 16, it's the key to understanding, "no longer as a slave but better than a slave, as a dear brother." How does the New Testament deal with slavery? It deals with slavery by dealing with the heart. Let me say that again. The New Testament deals with slavery by dealing with the heart. The change of heart. Onesimus' heart has been changed. He's been born again. He's a new creature in Christ. His master also had experienced this new birth and that's how Paul can send him back, sending him back not as a slave but as a brother.

Do you see how the seeds of the end of slavery are sown in the New Testament? The same thing is true with many other things including the brutality of the Roman sports, blood sports, gladiatorial games. Do you see the wickedness of society is never going to be changed by force and violence, it's by gentle, prayerful witness. Do you see this wonderful letter of Philemon is about ending slavery but ending it not with swords flashing, roll of stirring drums, it's by ending it with people's hearts being changed and transformed.

Then Paul goes on and says, "He's very dear to me but even dearer to you both as a man as a brother in the Lord." And then he makes an interesting statement, "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me." Welcome this runaway slave? Welcome this rebellious man as if he's the Apostle Paul himself? Then he says in verse 18, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me." Do you know that the love of money is the root of all evil? What is money? Money is mammon and mammon is not just money, it's the power that money has. It's what we all struggle with because it gets ahold of us and it pulls us down and Paul is saying, "Has he wronged you? Does he owe you anything? Charge it to me."

Then he goes on and he said, "I'll pay it," in verse 19, "I'm writing this with my own hand. I'll pay it back, not to mention that you owe me your very self." Huh. "Philemon, you were on your way to hell and if God Almighty in his sovereign grace had not intervened in your life, that's where you would be going very soon, very shortly. You owe me your very self."

Now let's go back into Peter's words in 1 Peter 2 and that's page 1889, and he's saying then in verse 18, "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect not only to those who are good and considerate but also to those who are harsh." Verse 19, "For it is commendable if a man bears up under pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God." May I let you in on a secret? You're gonna suffer anyhow in life. To live very long in this world is to suffer. Job said, "Man that is born of woman is a few days and born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." Why not let your suffering count for good? How can your suffering count for good? Well, we read on.

He says in verse 20, "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?" And then he goes on and he says, "But if you suffer for doing good and

you endure it, this is commendable before God." Verse 21, "To this you were called because Christ suffered for you leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps." So what's going on in your life? What are you mad about today? What has you upset today? What are you frustrated over with today? What is it that you're struggling with and you say, "Oh God, I could be happy if blank, blank, blank, blank," what? What is it you're holding onto that makes you miserable? Whatever it is, I want to lift up to you the cross, lift high the cross of Christ. When you feel that you're suffering unjustly, you probably are but, guess what? You're not through suffering yet. It's going to continue until what?

Well, let's look back at chapter 2, verse 11, the opposite page, 1888, "Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in this world." What are you a citizen of? Texarkana is going to be destroyed. Utterly, totally and completely as is central Louisiana. Everything that you and I see and have seen and have seen photographs of, it's all going to be destroyed. Peter's second letter says that instead of a flood of water, that earth and the entire cosmos is going to experience a cosmic meltdown where the very smallest elements are going to melt because of intense heat. It's going to happen. It may be going to happen much sooner than we might imagine. You know, we always say Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again, but probably not for a couple thousand years, we think in our minds. Well, maybe during these days we begin to think, "Wow, hm." I do believe this, the return of Christ is after Christ has conquered and I believe that is a reference to what's sometimes called the thousand years, but it's up to God to determine the extent of that conquest. Has enough conquest happened now for Christ to be able to return and keep his promises? I believe so. Could it happen a thousand years from now? A thousand years is one day. The point I want you to understand is everything that you have loved and cherished, every relationship, everything you have valued is going to be consumed because God is in the process of shaking the world so that you might receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

That's what counts and this is what he says, "Remember that you're an alien." You're an alien. You're an illegal alien or a legal alien but you're an alien. "You're a stranger in the world and therefore abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul." We think of those sinful desires in more graphic terms but, you know, those desires can be, "I'm right!" Do you need to be right? The need for people to recognize that I'm right? For my children and grandchildren to respect me? It's their duty, it's not my right. Peace and happiness come when we give up our rights at the foot of the cross. That doesn't free others of their obligations and duties.

We go on, verse 12, "Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." It's coming.

So being a slave in the ancient world, if the price of my slavery is that men and women and boys and girls would come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, so be it. That's what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 7 and that's what Peter's saying. How do you deal with people? How do you deal with oppression? How do you deal with an unjust society? Has there

ever been a just society on this earth? No. No. No. Not since the garden of Eden when our first parents rebelled against God. Are there some civilizations that are more just than others? Absolutely. Give me Cortez any day over the Aztecs. Eat your heart out, baby. Give me the British Colonies on the eastern seaboard over the Conquistadors in the southwest. But it's never just. It's never just. Are we going to correct the wrongs of history by this or that? What do you do? You've got to finally lay it all down at the foot of the cross because that's where freedom comes.

Look, the most important single thing in your life is that it counts for the Lord Jesus Christ. Texarkana and the surrounding communities is filled with lost people who believe they are not lost. God's law is designed to humble us and break us and make us sing in the words of that spiritual, "It's not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." And Bible preaching is supposed to make your toes hurt, it's supposed to make you upset and angry, and then to turn that anger into self-reflection so you say, "O God, what can I do? What can I do? What can help me?" And then lift high the cross because the Lord Jesus Christ is the only solution to America and the only solution of the world. "Put no confidence in princes, nor for help on man depend. He shall die, to dust returning, and his purposes shall end." In the final analysis, I don't know what's going on. I don't know what's going to happen in the future but I know this, my life and your life is important for one fundamental reason, that our lives would shine and point people to Christ; where people would say, "You know, I don't understand how she can be happy in all that pain."

What's the secret of happiness? It's letting go of everything. All my dreams and aspirations, all my fears, all my hopes, all my hurts, letting it go and laying it at the foot of the cross because in the final analysis America is done for, as is Europe, as is China, as is Africa. We're all done for. When civilization has been completed on this earth, there's going to be one massive understanding and that is when the books are opened, you'll be shocked at what you understand about other people. Every hero you've ever thought about, everyone you've ever looked up to. But you know what? You're not going to be looking at them, you're going to be saying, "O Lord, no, not that!" Technicolor. There it is, not only everything I've ever done, everything I've ever said, but the thoughts that I've entertained. And why? Because God wants us to turn from the rags of our self-righteousness and cast ourselves on his mercy in Jesus Christ, and the good news is this: there's not a person here today young or old, good and respectable by the standards of northeast Texas, northwest Arkansas, or central west Arkansas, there's not a person here no matter how vile and terrible but the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin. Share the Gospel with your neighbors. That's the only reason he's left you alive. Really? That's what counts in life. As you do things to serve others for the sake of Christ, always remember the heart of the matter is the Lord Jesus Christ bore our sins on the cross.

May we pray.

Lord, we pray as we look at an evil world, a world that was plunged into misery and chaos, disease and death and divorce and war and chaos and hatred and murder, such

as Cain murdering his home-schooled, home-churched brother. Lord, in the final analysis to whom shall we go for you have the words of eternal life. Grant, O God, that each one of us here would truly have come to that point of surrender and laying our lives down again and saying, "Take me and use me," that a world that's lost and dying and that does not know the answer will find that answer in the Prince of Peace who loved us and gave himself for us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.