

Submission in the Workplace, Part 1

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:18–19a

Code: 60-26

INTRODUCTION

First Peter 2:18-21 says, "Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose." Those verses tell the believer how to live in society.

A. The Attitude of Society

Our society is preoccupied with demanding its rights. It campaigns for the rights of students, women, children, homosexuals, illegal immigrants, criminals, employees, and the homeless. When people believe their rights have been denied, they often react with strikes, protests, insurrections, and walk outs. The underlying mentality is, "Give me my rights or I'll fight back in every way possible."

In contrast, God's Word says Christians are not to demand their rights by being troublemakers or lawbreakers in society. The believing citizen is to submit to civil authorities (1 Pet. 2:13-17) and the believing servant is to submit to his master (vv. 18-21).

B. The Example of David

David was an example of how we are to serve others without demanding our rights.

1. His adversary

God chose David to replace Saul as king of Israel. Saul became jealous of David and sought to kill him.

After David killed Goliath, "the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with joy and with musical instruments. And the women sang as they played, and said, 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.' Then Saul became very angry, for this saying displeased him; and he said, 'They have ascribed to David ten thousands, but to me they have ascribed thousands. Now what more can he have but the kingdom?' And Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on.

"Now it came about on the next day that an evil spirit from God came mightily upon Saul, and he raved in the midst of the house, while David was playing the harp with his hand, as usual; and a spear was in Saul's hand. And Saul hurled the spear for he thought, 'I will pin David to the wall.' But David escaped from his presence twice" (1 Sam. 18:6-11). He finally had to run away from Saul altogether (19:9-10).

2. His attitude

Even though he knew God had chosen him to be king, David didn't demand his right to rule or seek vengeance against Saul.

a) 1 Samuel 24:2-12--Saul continued to seek David's life. He "took three thousand chosen men from all Israel, and went to seek David and his men in front of the Rocks of the Wild Goats. And he came to the sheepfolds on the way, where there was a cave; and Saul went in to relieve himself." Now David and his men were sitting in the inner recesses of the cave. And the men of David said to him, 'Behold, this is the day of which the Lord said to you, "Behold; I am about to give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you."' Then David arose and cut off the edge

of Saul's robe secretly."And it came about afterward that David's conscience bothered him because he had cut off the edge of Saul's robe. So he said to his men, 'Far be it from me because of the Lord that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the Lord's anointed.' And David persuaded his men with these words and did not allow them to rise up against Saul. And Saul arose, left the cave, and went on his way."Now afterward David arose and went out of the cave and called after Saul, saying, 'My lord the king!' And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the ground and prostrated himself. And David said to Saul, 'Why do you listen to the words of men, saying, "Behold, David seeks to harm you"? Behold, this day your eyes have seen that the Lord had given you today into my hand in the cave, and some said to kill you, but my eye had pity on you; and I said, "I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord's anointed."'"Now, my father, see! Indeed, see the edge of your robe in my hand! For in that I cut off the edge of your robe and did not kill you, know and perceive that there is no evil or rebellion in my hands, and I have not sinned against you, though you are lying in wait for my life to take it. May the Lord judge between you and me.... But my hand shall not be against you."b) 1 Samuel 26:6-12--David asked, "'Who will go down with me to Saul in the camp?' And Abishai said, 'I will go down with you.' So David and Abishai came to the people by night, and behold, Saul lay sleeping inside the circle of the camp, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the people were lying around him. Then Abishai said to David, 'Today God has delivered your enemy into your hand; now therefore, please let me strike him with the spear to the ground with one stroke, and I will not strike him the second time.'"But David said to Abishai, 'Do not destroy him, for who can stretch out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be without guilt?' David also said, 'As the Lord lives, surely the Lord will strike him, or his day will come that he dies, or he will go down into battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed; but now please take the spear that is at his head and the jug of water, and let us go.'"So David took the spear and the jug of water from beside Saul's head, and they went away, but no one saw or knew it, nor did any awake, for they were all asleep, because a sound sleep from the Lord had fallen on them."

C. The Responsibility of Believers

As believers we are to follow David's example of respecting those in authority.

1. Romans 12:17-19--"Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God."

2. Luke 6:32-35--"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same thing. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men."

3. 1 Corinthians 7:20-21, 24--"Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.... Let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called." Although the obvious assumption is that freedom is better than slavery, Paul certainly wasn't calling slaves to rebel against their owners.

Similarly, 1 Peter 2:18-21 says the servant is to submit to his master. Today that means the employee is to respect his employer.

LESSON

I. THE MANDATE FOR SUBMISSION (v. 18)

"Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable."

A. A Slave in Roman Society

The dominant social structure of the Roman Empire was slavery. Often slaves were the objects of disrespect. The influential philosopher Aristotle, for example, implied that friendship and justice are no more applicable to a slave than to a horse or ox. He said, "A slave is a living tool, and a tool is an inanimate slave," reducing the slave even lower to the level of an inanimate object (Ethics, 1161b). The Roman nobleman Varro, writing about agriculture, said the only difference between a slave, a beast, and a cart was that a slave could talk (On Landed Estates, 1:17.1).

B. A Slave in the Early Church

It's likely that most Christians in the early church were slaves, for 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 says, "Consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God." Although many believers had a life of servitude, they were spiritually free in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

In 1 Peter 2:18 the Greek term translated "servants" (oiket[ma]es) means "house servants." Most slaves served the owner in his home or estate. "Masters" (despot[ma]es, from which we derive the English word despot) refers to absolute ownership and power. "Be submissive" speaks of continual submission.

1. His fear of God

Verse 18 says servants were to submit "with all respect" (Gk., phobos, from which we derive the English word phobia). The word speaks of fearing God, not man. We are to be mindful of God in what we do and say (1:17; 2:17; 3:2, 15). That includes respecting the social order, such as the employer-employee relationship, since He has sovereignly designed it for the sake of orderliness and productivity.

2. His respect for leaders

a) The teaching of Peter Peter instructed servants to submit to their masters, some of whom were "good and gentle" (2:18). The Greek term translated "good" (agathos) refers to kindness and benevolence. "Gentle" (epieikeia) speaks of being reasonable and fair. It characterizes someone who willingly forgoes his rights and accepts less than he is due. It's easy to obey someone like that. The challenge, Peter implied, is in submitting to those who are "unreasonable" (Gk., skolios, from which we derive the English word scoliosis). The word means "crooked" or "perverse" and characterizes someone who is harsh, unkind, or ungracious. In our society a person can look for another job if his or her employer is unreasonable. In Peter's day, however, that was not an option since masters owned their slaves. b) The example of Paul While in prison, Paul led Onesimus, a runaway slave, to faith in Christ and sent him back to Philemon, his owner (Philem. 1:10-15). Note that Paul didn't tell Onesimus to give Philemon a difficult time or be an insurrectionist. Rather, his teaching squares with what Peter taught: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ...." "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him" (Eph. 6:5, 7-9, NIV). Because God has sovereignly established the social order, we are to serve our employer as though we are serving the Lord (cf. Col. 3:17, 22-25). If employers are unfair, God will deal with them. The mandate is to submit, not strike or demonstrate. That doesn't mean such actions are always wrong for employees as opposed to slaves since strikes and demonstrations are legal provisions in our society, but the overarching principle is to entrust ourselves to God's care, knowing He will reward us for our willingness to show the proper respect.

II. THE MOTIVE FOR SUBMISSION (v. 19a)

"This finds favor."

We please God when we submit to our employer with respect, but displease Him when we complain bitterly or are cantankerous. Ephesians 6:6 says we are to work "not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart." We are to work hard and have a good attitude, even when the supervisor is not watching. That kind of testimony will not only rebuke the unreasonable person, but also shine as an ornament of God's grace.

CONCLUSION

When I was a boy, my father told me about a young soldier who had a difficult time in training camp because he was weak physically. One day he was unable to continue a training exercise and lay prone on the ground. The sergeant approached him and kicked him again and again with his boots. The soldier was in such pain that he had to be carried back to his bunk.

When reveille blew the next morning, the sergeant awakened and reached down to put his boots on. As he did, he noticed that someone had shined them. Upon discovering that the young soldier was responsible, he asked why he had done it. The soldier replied, "Because Christ has given me a love for you." The soldier then had an opportunity to give his testimony, and later on the sergeant became a Christian.

God's mandate is that we respect and obey those in authority over us. Our attitude should reflect a willingness to endure anything in this life for the joy of the life to come and the opportunity to be a good testimony to others.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What was David's attitude toward Saul (1 Sam. 24:2-13; 26:6-12)?
2. Romans 12:17 says, "pay back evil for evil to anyone".
3. According to Luke 6:35 who is kind to ungrateful and evil men?
4. How does the teaching regarding the master and servant in 1 Peter 2:18-21 apply today?
5. What was the dominant social structure of the Roman Empire?
6. What does Galatians 3:28 teach?
7. What does "with all respect" speak of in 1 Peter 2:18?
8. Who designs the social order?
9. What do "good" and "gentle" refer to (1 Pet. 2:18)?
10. What kind of person does "unreasonable" characterize (1 Pet. 2:18)?
11. What does Paul's example in the book of Philemon show us?
12. According to Ephesians 6:8 what does the Lord reward?
13. What is the overarching principle for the employee to follow in the workplace?
14. How do we please God according to 1 Peter 2:18-19?
15. What kind of testimony shines as an ornament of God's grace?
16. What should our attitude reflect a willingness to do?

Pondering the Principles

1. Colossians 3:23 says we are to "work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men." What about you? Do you reflect that attitude in your workplace? Do you respect your employer? Are you faithful and diligent or are you critical, obstinate, and rude? Are you careful about your use of company time and property? Ask the Lord to help you honor His name where you work. If you are an employer or supervisor, ask the Lord to help you treat the workers in a fair and just way.
2. Bible commentator John Brown wrote, "The unkind, irritating behaviour of the master, is not to be sustained as an excuse for evading or disobeying his commands, or even for yielding a grudging

obedience: the hardships of the situations are to be patiently submitted to while they continue; and there is to be no attempt to lessen or remove them by neglecting or violating relative duty" (Expository Discourses on 1 Peter [Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975], p. 499). If you are treated unfairly, realize that your obedient service honors Christ and attracts the lost to Him. In addition, the Lord will reward you for it (Eph. 6:8). Read and meditate on Psalm 57, making note of the principles that apply to your situation.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2026 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).