

Better to Do Right and Suffer

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There are innumerable ways in which the viewpoint of the Christian must differ from the viewpoint of the world. One of the most significant of these concerns suffering. There can be no doubt that we live in a hedonistic age. Millions of people in this country have no greater goal in their lives than seeking out what is pleasurable and avoiding what is painful. To them, the fact that an activity will cause suffering is sufficient reason to avoid it. As Christians, however, we have greater concerns than making our lives as pleasurable as possible. We do not serve ourselves, nor what best pleases our flesh. Instead, we serve our Savior, regardless of the cost. This morning, then, let's look at the times when it is better to do right and suffer.

Jesus and Suffering

This is not some some sidelight of Christianity, not some footnote in the gospel. Instead, the willingness to do right even if suffering results is at the heart of our faith. We see this clearly when we consider the relationship between Jesus and suffering. Few contexts better define this than Peter's exploration of the topic in 1 Peter 2, so let's open our Bibles and turn there.

Within this text, Peter first describes Jesus as **OUR EXAMPLE**. Look with me at 1 Peter 2:21. This is a famous verse, no doubt about it. This is the text that launched the whole "What would Jesus do?" movement more than a hundred years ago. Any preacher who wants to make the point that we are supposed to use Jesus as our example is probably going to use this verse. Now, don't get me wrong; I think it's entirely legitimate to say that Jesus is supposed to be our example in everything. However, that is not what this passage is specifically about. Instead, Peter's point is that Jesus is supposed to be our example in suffering.

What an alien thought! After all, not all the pleasure-seekers in our country are atheists. Indeed, most of them aren't. Instead, most of them claim the name of Christ. Countless preachers in countless churches all across this country preach a pain-free version of the gospel. They ask us to believe that following Jesus is a road to riches and earthly happiness.

This is a gospel with tremendous fleshly appeal, and it will always have its adherents, but it bears much more resemblance to the teachings of the Pharisees than it does to the teachings of the Lord. Jesus was born poor, lived poor, and died poor. If His goal in life was to find earthly happiness, He was a miserable failure. Of course, that wasn't the Lord's goal at all. He came to earth to glorify God, even if glorifying God meant His death. He didn't enjoy suffering, but it was more important to Him to please God than it was to avoid pain, even the pain of death on the cross. Peter wants us to understand that there will be times in our lives when we are faced with the choice of suffering for doing right. If we are truly following Jesus, we will be willing to follow Him in His suffering too.

We see our Lord's commitment displayed in the perfection of **HIS CONDUCT**. Peter describes the way that Jesus lived and died in 1 Peter 2:22-23. First, Jesus committed no sin. Whatever else Jesus' life may have been, a pleasure-seeking life it was not! If we love nothing more than pleasure, the devil will have an easy time leading us astray. Righteousness, on the other hand, requires us to reject the passing pleasures of sin. It's not fun to be the Christian teenager who refuses to go to a party with his friends because he knows there will be drinking there. It's not fun to be the Christian office worker who refuses to eat lunch with her handsome, charming, witty, married boss because she can tell he has more than work on his mind. It's not fun to reject the allure of Internet pornography, or to make do with less money because we won't work Sundays, or shun a thousand and one other things that the world does, but we belong to Jesus, not the world.

Similarly, no deceit was found in Jesus' mouth. Every sin has to do with seeking something pleasurable, and lying is no exception. Plain and simple, we lie because we think the results of telling the truth will be painful. Often, we're right about that. This is particularly true when we have practiced some secret sin and we lie to cover it up. We tell Mom and Dad that we were at a friend's house last night, because if we tell them that we actually went to that club that we aren't supposed to go to, we'll get grounded. Not so with Jesus. Of course, Jesus never had to lie to cover up sin, but there were plenty of times in His life where he had the opportunity to tell an easy lie instead of the harsh truth. However, He always chose the latter.

Also, Peter gives us a vivid description of the way that Jesus conducted Himself both during His trial and even while on the cross. Even when His tormentors lashed out at Him, He didn't allow Himself the satisfaction of lashing back at them. He could have made His accusers look like fools, but He bit His tongue instead. When He was on the cross, He could have uttered all kinds of threats against His enemies—threats entirely within His power to carry out. However, He trusted in God for His vindication, not in His own ability to defend Himself, and this too must be an example for us.

Finally in this context, we see Peter's description of **JESUS' PURPOSE**. Consider 1 Peter 2:24-25. Almost as much as Jesus did what He did for the love of God, He did it because He loved us too. He lived perfectly so that He could die perfectly, the only possible sacrifice for our sins. He suffered, even though He didn't deserve it, so that we who do deserve to suffer can be healed. He left God behind in heaven so that He could reunite us with Himself and with His Father both.

This defines the difference between godly suffering and suffering for suffering's sake. There are all kinds of messed-up people out there who seek out relationships that will make them miserable, jobs that will make them miserable, and indeed lives that will make them miserable because deep down, they believe that they don't deserve any better and find satisfaction in being unhappy. That cannot be our purpose. There is no holiness, only spiritual illness, in the misguided search for unnecessary suffering.

Like Jesus, then, Christians should accept suffering not because they find a twisted delight in it, but because they want to serve God, and sometimes serving God comes with a price tag of suffering attached. The suffering itself is not good—indeed, it is never good—but if we glorify God in suffering, that can bear fruit for Him in ways that we never imagined. It isn't important whether our lives please us. It is all-important whether those lives please Him. Let's reflect on these things as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

Doing Right in Speech

We see, then, that sooner or later, walking in the steps of Jesus means sharing in His sufferings. This is apparent in the choices that we make in our speech. For instance, we are often called upon to imitate Christ in **CONTROLLING OUR TEMPERS**. Proverbs 16:32 points this out. This is something that nearly all of us will acknowledge when we are not caught up in the moment. Yes, it's good and advantageous to hold our tongues rather than blurt out an ill-considered retort. Yes, it's good to rule our tempers rather than allowing our tempers to rule us.

However, what we want to do when tempted is very different from what we say we ought to do when we are not, and nowhere is this more apparent than with our tempers. The devil is quick to provide us with a whole list of reasons why restraining our anger is a bad idea. He'll say to us, "You need to show these people that you'll stand up for yourself." He'll say, "You don't want them to think you're weak, do you?" He'll say, "You're not going to let them get away with treating you like that, are you?" Most of all, the devil loves to summon up within us that false sense of righteousness that anger provides.

It's not fun to choke those hot-tempered words down. It's not fun to let the other guy "get away with it". However, it is better. First, we must consider the practical consequences. I've been saying this ever since I started preaching, and it's still true. There have been many times in my life when I surrendered to temptation and expressed my anger. However, not a single one of those angry moments gives me any satisfaction today. Instead, I invariably regret the things that I say in anger.

Second, and even more importantly, our hot tempers will get us in hot water with God. There is a place in our lives for godly anger, when we are outraged by the sin of another. However, anger in our lives is usually an expression of selfishness and of lack of faith. When we express our fury, we show that we ourselves are first in our lives and God is second. We also reveal by our determination to take care of ourselves that we don't trust that He will take care of us. It is far better then that we remain silent.

However, there are also times when silence is not the best policy. Sometimes, following Christ will lead us to **REBUKING ANOTHER OPENLY**. Look at Proverbs 27:5. This takes great courage. It's easy to express our selfish indignation, but it's hard to rebuke someone else to his face, to point out the sin in his life to him when we aren't in the heat of the moment. In fact, it's fair to say that one of the most disregarded commandments in the Bible is Jesus' admonition in Matthew 18 that when we see our brother in sin, we are to go and tell him of his sin. We're pretty good at telling third parties about our brother's sin, but we shy away from direct confrontation. It's painful for us even to begin such an unpleasant conversation,

and the fallout from it may be even more painful. What if our brother doesn't listen and gets mad at us for telling him something he doesn't want to hear?

However, if we want to imitate our Lord, we will not shy away from telling an unpleasant truth. Jesus was never a coward. He boldly confronted the hypocrisy and wickedness of the Pharisees, even though He knew that their undying enmity would be the result. He challenged the multitudes to repent, and though most didn't hear Him, some did. If we are truly disciples of Jesus, we won't be mute in the face of wickedness either. We will speak truth and invite the consequences.

Our willingness to speak the truth, however, must not come from an attitude of self-righteousness or moral superiority. Instead, as Paul reveals in Ephesians 4, we must speak the truth in love. We must also be willing to express this love by **BLESSING** even those who curse us. Consider the words of our Lord in Luke 6:27-28. We see the difficulty of this in the nearly universal behavior of all non-believers, and indeed of many believers. When most Americans are cursed at, their mildest response is "Same to you, buddy!" It goes downhill from there. There is something deeply satisfying about striking back at our tormentors. As we've already seen, it's hard to keep those harsh words from tripping off our tongues.

It's even harder, though, to replace the curses that our fleshly nature wants to utter with the blessings that the Savior wants us to utter. However, the Lord's desires in this matter are clear, not only from His commands, but from His actions. When He was dying on the cross, He not only remained silent, but actively prayed for God to forgive the very people who had put Him there. Friends, that is awe-inspiring! Jesus' love for others was so great that He still cared about the souls of villains like Annas and Caiaphas.

The lesson for us, then, is that we must remember that whenever someone else curses us, or even actively opposes us, we are still dealing with someone who is created in the image of God. We are still dealing with someone who has a soul that is more precious than the earth and all it contains. It's no more right for us to strike back at them than it would be for us to smash a collection of Fabergé eggs.

All of us are born selfish. All of us remain selfish past the point when we are old enough to know better. When we are surrounded by those who are selfish and don't even know it, it's easy for us to pay them back in their own selfish coin. However, we have a higher calling, and we must follow it, even when it hurts.

Finally, we must be willing to suffer in doing right by **PROCLAIMING JESUS**. We see Peter and the apostles doing this in Acts 5:27-29. To appreciate what they do here, we first must appreciate the context of this text. The Sanhedrin has already warned the apostles not to preach the gospel. They have defied this prohibition by continuing to preach openly. Annas makes clear here that he knows what the apostles are up to. They mean to accuse the chief priests of having murdered the Messiah. When Peter says that they must obey God rather than men, he then continues on to repeat that accusation. It is nearly certain that Peter expects to die as a result of saying this, and indeed the only thing that spares the apostles is the intervention of Gamaliel. Peter's willingness to suffer for doing right could not be clearer.

Today, we are extremely unlikely to be in a position where telling others about Jesus will put our lives at risk. However, it is fair to say that fear is one of the biggest obstacles between modern-day Christians and fulfilling the Great Commission. We're convinced that if we are open about our religious convictions with our friends and neighbors, much less invite them to services, some unspecified Bad Thing will happen.

We must recognize, though, that we agreed to face negative consequences when we obeyed the gospel. Jesus never called us to take up our beds of roses. He called us to take up our crosses. The Holy Spirit is very up-front about the cost of discipleship, and we are commanded to count it before we pledge our faithfulness. Most of the time, expression of our faith does not actually have negative consequences. Most of the time, we meet with polite rejection, which is to persecution as missing a meal is to famine. However, if there are negative consequences, that's all part of the bargain. We don't get to unilaterally say, "I'm not going to obey You in that, Lord, because I might suffer if I do." That's called faithlessness.

In Action

Similarly, there are many areas in our lives where we might engage in a right action and suffer for it. The first and most general of these is **DISCIPLINING OURSELVES**. Paul discusses this subject in 1 Corinthians 9:26-27. Every one of us who has ever trained for some physical activity knows that training involves suffering. We don't enjoy running wind sprints until we throw up. However, training is essential to success, because athletes who don't train will have their stamina fail them when they need it the most.

Paul tells us here that Christians have to train too, except that we must train ourselves. This is key. We can't rely on others to train us. No preacher nor Bible-class teacher, no matter how skilled he may be, is going to fully prepare us to run the race before us. We have to train ourselves. We have to train ourselves by spending time with the word on a daily basis, even if there's a show on TV that we really want to watch. We have to train ourselves by rejecting temptation, even if the sin appears especially enjoyable.

This process may not be pleasant, but its effects are indispensable. Recent studies have revealed that our self-control is like a muscle. The more we exercise it, the stronger it gets. Conversely, if we take the easy path, if we don't practice righteousness and embrace sin, that will weaken our self-control, and soon we will become incapable of any spiritual exertion. Only self-discipline stands between us and failure.

We should not underestimate the lengths to which this may take us, how far we must go in **SEVERING OURSELVES FROM SIN**. Consider our Lord's alarming message in Matthew 5:29-30. Of course, this is not about literal hacking off of body parts. It does me no good to gouge out my right eye if I go on using the left one to lust or covet. However, it does describe the ruthless attitude we must have to things in our lives that pull us away from God. There is nothing so precious that it is worth holding on to at the expense of going to heaven. Jennifer may have been our best friend since elementary school. She may have been maid of honor at our wedding. However, if Jennifer is a drunk and an adulteress who is now on her third husband, and she urges us to party and be immoral too, it doesn't matter how much we enjoy her company. Jennifer has got to go. We can't afford friends like that.

Let's say we've got a favorite TV show—wonderful writing and acting, a gripping plot, but also the occasional steamy bedroom scene. We find ourselves comparing the no-holds-barred fantasy with the ups and downs of married life, and not surprisingly, married life ends up in second place. Friends, we've got to get that show off our DVR's before it corrupts us any further. If we put fantasy over reality, it won't be long before we find ourselves caught up in pornography use or worse. We can't afford entertainment like that.

These examples, and countless others like them, are not fanciful hypotheticals. Real, flesh-and-blood Christians lose their souls every day because they were corrupted by evil influences they loved too much to get rid of. Nothing would make the devil happier than for us to be next. Sure; it's hard to sever those relationships. It's hard to abandon those habits. However, it is far better than the alternative.

This is true not only of the lust of the flesh, but also of the lust of the eye. We are far better served in **REJECTING DISHONEST GAIN** than in accepting it. Consider Proverbs 28:6. We should not see this text as exalting poverty. I've been poor before. I've been out of work before. I don't ever want to be any of those things again, and I'm thankful for every day in which God allows me to support my family.

However, it is far better to be poor and righteous than it is to be rich and corrupt. In extreme cases, this is obvious. I don't think any of us would say to ourselves, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if I became a drug dealer?" However, Satan will likely sow subtler temptations in our path. I know a brother in Christ who is an accountant whose bosses asked him once to massage the books. At my wife's last job, her boss frequently lied on the phone and wanted her to do the same. How about the congregation that starts hinting to the preacher that he's been doing too much negative preaching recently and needs to lighten up a little bit, regardless of what his conscience says about declaring the whole counsel of God?

In situations like that, do we compromise to keep everybody at the office happy, or do we refuse to budge an inch, even if we end up getting a reputation or even getting fired over it? The accountant brother I mentioned did get fired over it, by the way. It happens. We need to decide, though, that our job security is less important to us than the security of our relationship with God. Far better to offend them than Him.

Finally, we must be willing to suffer in actively **DOING GOOD**. Look at 1 Peter 3:17. Sometimes doing the right thing will have consequences as negative as refusing to do the wrong thing. For instance, never in my life have I felt any pressure not to go to church, but nearly every Christian woman married to a non-Christian husband has a story to tell about how her church attendance has caused friction in her marriage. I've never had to stay true to my word even when I signed a disadvantageous contract, but some brethren have, and they've lost a lot of money over it. I've never had to forgive the child molester who abused a member of my family, but some Christians have had to face that too. These are not easy things to do. They are not satisfying things to do. They may well cause intense struggle and heartache, but they are still the right things to do. Jesus did good and suffered for it. We can do no less.