

HANDLE UNJUST TREATMENT IN A CHRIST-LIKE WAY

2¹⁸Let the servants be in submission to their masters with all respect, not only submitting to the good and kind masters, but also to those who are harsh. ¹⁹It is commendable if a man endures the pain of unjust suffering because of his consciousness of God. ²⁰What credit is there if, when you sin and are beaten, you bear it? But if you bear it when you do what is right and suffer for it, this is pleasing to God. ²¹This is [part of] your calling, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example with the intention that you should follow in his footsteps. ²²He “committed no sin, neither was [any] deceit found in his mouth.” ²³When they insulted him, he did not insult them; when he suffered, he did not threaten; rather, he committed himself to him who judges righteously. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to our sins, we might live for righteousness—by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵You, like sheep, were going astray, but now you have been returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:18-25)

Introduction

In the spring of 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first black man to play major league baseball.

It had been an injustice that black men were barred from the major leagues because of the color of their skin, and this black man would encounter a great deal of unjust treatment because he was attempting to play major league baseball.

Some 30 years earlier, the man who was now the general manager of the Dodgers had seen the unjust and humiliating treatment a black teammate had received when their college baseball team had checked into a South Bend, IN, hotel—the black man was refused a room and a bed. That incident made a deep and lasting impression on the young man who now, 32 years later, was the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. He resolved that he was going to do something about it; he was going to break down the color barrier in major league baseball. But he knew that he had to carefully select just the right man to do it: a man who not only possessed the athletic ability to play on the major league level, but one who also had the Christian character to handle unjust treatment in a “Christ-like” manner. He selected Jackie Robinson, in large measure because of his “Christian” upbringing that he had received from his mother.

In a private interview in his Brooklyn office, he made it clear to Robinson that, no matter what happened, Jackie had to respond in a “Christian” manner.

Robinson agreed, and abided by his word. When some of his own teammates on the Dodgers refused to accept him, he continued to do his job without protest. When the Philadelphia players reviled him in the most awful language, he refrained from reviling them in return. When a St. Louis base runner intentionally spiked him, opening a gash in his thigh, he refused to retaliate with violence.

Jackie Robinson was chosen to be the first black ballplayer in the major leagues, and he succeeded; not primarily because of his ability, but because he was willing to exemplify a “Christ-like” response to unjust treatment.

The Apostle Peter, writing to Christian people who encountered unjust treatment, instructs them and us in the same way Branch Rickey, the general manager of the 1947 Brooklyn Dodgers, instructed Jackie Robinson: You’ve got to handle it in a Christ-like manner.

I. Handle Unjust Treatment in a Christ-like Way, ...by Fulfilling Your Responsibilities

In these verses Peter is especially addressing the household servant: a slave who may have been looked down upon with contempt, treated with abuse, required to perform the most degrading and menial tasks. Note: As he continues, Peter is not only addressing such bondservants, but any Christian who may be encountering any form of unjust treatment.

The apostle’s instruction may be summed up as follows: Carry out your responsibilities with all reverence. That is to say, continue to fulfill your obligations and commitments, and do so with an attitude of respect, as opposed to an attitude of defiance or resentment. Faithfully carry out your responsibilities, regardless of the character or behavior of the other person, however unjust or irresponsible he may be. Peter exhorts the Christian servant to continue to fulfill his obligations and commitments not only when the person in charge is good and considerate, but even when they may show themselves to be harsh, unjust, and ungrateful.

Here is the biblical command as it is presented in verse 18: At all times and under all circumstances, be conscious of your responsibilities and continue to faithfully carry them out: *“Let the servants be in submission to their masters with all respect, not only submitting to the good and kind masters, but also to those who are harsh.”* We are instinctively aware of the moral laws that govern interpersonal relationships: there are mutual responsibilities and obligations in any human relationship. We instinctively react to unfair treatment with the response, “If he does not abide by his obligations and fulfill his responsibilities, neither will I fulfill mine!” But Scripture is here instructing us as Christians to continue to “play by the rules,” to continue to faithfully fulfill our obligations in a relationship, no matter what the other person does. Note: This counsel of Scripture as contained here in 1 Peter 2:18 does not mean that we may not lodge a legitimate protest and seek redress when we have been wronged. When Abraham had been cheated by Abimelech’s servants, he protested the injustice to Abimelech: *“Then Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized”* (Gen. 21:25.) But Peter’s exhortation does mean that we may not become like the offender in that we, like him, forsake our responsibilities and renege on

our commitments. Our Lord Jesus gives us instructions as to how we are to handle a situation involving offense among Christian brothers:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matt. 18:15-17)

Let us be sure to handle unjust treatment in a Christ-like way, by continuing to fulfill our responsibilities. By way of example: When a grown son was asked why he continued to visit his father, even though his father had forsaken the family when the son was still a small child, the man replied, "It is still my God-given responsibility to honor my father. Despite the fact that he has not fulfilled his responsibility to his family, I must still fulfill my responsibility to him."

II. Handle Unjust Treatment in a Christ-like Way, ...by Placing Your Confidence in God

In verse 19 the Apostle Peter is describing someone who encounters unjust treatment and handles it in a Christ-like way "*because of his consciousness of God.*"

Especially when we encounter unjust treatment, we need to be conscious of God's presence. We need to be conscious of His attentiveness. When Israel was in bondage to the Egyptians, the LORD appeared to Moses and declared, "*I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering*" (Ex. 3:7.) We need to be conscious of His concern for us: "*humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, (so that he may exalt you at the appointed time), ⁷by casting all your cares upon him, because he cares for you*" (1 Pet. 5:6-7.)

Especially when we encounter unjust treatment, we need to be aware of God's sovereign control over the situation. When he was being slandered, David's perspective was, "The LORD is in charge and the LORD will take care of it":

As King David approached Bahurim, a man from the same clan as Saul's family came out from there. His name was Shimei son of Gera, and he cursed as he came out. ⁶He pelted David and all the king's officials with stones, though all the troops and the special guard were on David's right and left. ⁷As he cursed, Shimei said, Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel! ... ¹¹David then said to Abishai and all his officials ... Leave him alone; let him curse, for Jehovah has told him to do so. ¹²It may be that Jehovah will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today. (2 Sam.1 6:5-7,11-12)

When he received word of the devastating losses he suffered, even suffering the loss of his own sons, Job's perspective was: "We should expect to receive not only blessing, but also trials from the hand of the LORD":

Then his wife said to him, Are you still maintaining your integrity? Renounce God and die! ¹⁰But he said to her, You are speaking like one of the foolish women. Shall we [only] accept good from the hand of God, and shall we not accept calamity? (Job 2:9-10a)

When he confronted his brothers with the evil they perpetrated against him, Joseph's perspective was: "God can take what men intend for evil and from it bring blessing":

As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, [namely] the saving of many lives. (Gen. 50:20)

When he experienced malicious treatment at the hands of his enemies who sought to incite the Roman authorities against him, Paul's perspective was: "God can use even the worst of things for the furtherance of our salvation":

I know that, through your prayers and the help provided by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the result of all this will be my deliverance. ²⁰This is in keeping with my heart-felt expectation and hope that in no circumstance will I be put to shame; on the contrary, I have all confidence that as always, so now also, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. (Phil. 1:19-20)

When we encounter unjust treatment, we must be ever conscious of God's ultimate commitment to justice. Consider Abraham's rhetorical question: "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*" (Gen. 18:25.) Consider, also, Moses' testimony: "*The Rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice: a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he*" (Deut. 32:4.) Let us be assured that the Lord will cause justice to prevail: "*God is just: He will pay back affliction to those who afflict you ⁷and give relief to you who are afflicted, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels*" (2 Thess. 1:6-7.) Also, let us be sure to leave the matter of justice in the hands of God rather than taking matters into your own hands: "*Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but allow God to express his wrath, for it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the LORD*" (Rom. 12:19.)

Let us be sure to handle unjust treatment in a Christ-like way, by placing our confidence in God. In verse 20 the Apostle Peter assures us that if we are doing good and—contrary to all expectation and all justice—we suffer for it, "*this is pleasing to God.*" That is to say, because such faithfulness is pleasing to God, it shall surely receive His favor (His blessing and reward.)

III. Handle Unjust Treatment in a Christ-like Way, ...by Being Conscious of Your Calling

In verse 20b Peter speaks of unjust suffering, and then in verse 21 he immediately declares, *"This is part of your calling."* What he means is that, as Christians, we must realize that unjust treatment is a very real and even inescapable part of the Christian life in this present sinful world, note 2 Timothy 3:12, *"everyone who would live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."* But, nevertheless, we are expected to handle it with steadfast faithfulness.

In encountering such treatment, we are experiencing the life of Christ and are identified with Him, as Peter points out in verses 21-23. We are reminded that Christ also suffered for us, therefore, let us realize when we encounter suffering and unjust treatment that Christ is not asking us to undergo anything that He Himself has not personally undergone for our sake.

We are further reminded that Christ has left us an example: an example of how to handle unjust treatment. Although He experienced the most awful form of abuse, He did not retaliate in kind; on the contrary, He put Himself and His cause into the hands of His heavenly Father, the true and only just Judge. Note: The gospels report that Jesus was *"handed over"* (παραδίδωμι) to sinners (Matthew 26:45,) Peter reports that Jesus *"handed himself over"* (παραδίδωμι) to God His Father (v. 23.)

Even as we are identified with our Lord in the unjust suffering He encountered, Peter reminds us to be conscious of our own lack of perfect innocence (vs. 24-25.) The reason Christ suffered the agony of the cross was in order to bear our sins—we, like sheep, were habitually wandering away from the law of God. Thus, the temptation to become self-righteous and judgmental in the face of unjust treatment should be tempered by the sobering awareness of our own sins and shortcomings. Was David's forbearance (in the incident recorded in 2 Samuel 16 referred to above) due to a consciousness of his own past sins in the case of the murder of Uriah? David was no doubt acutely aware that he was a *"man of blood"* as Shimei charged.

We must also be conscious of the fact that by Christ's atoning death and resurrection we have not only received forgiveness, but have also been called to live by the righteousness of Christ our Lord—which includes handling unjust treatment in a Christ-like manner.

Let us be sure to handle unjust treatment in a Christ-like way, by being conscious of our calling. As Christians we can expect to face something of what Christ faced from this world; and when we do, we are to handle it the way Christ handled it: *"When they insulted him, he did not insult them; when he suffered, he did not threaten; rather, he committed himself to him who judges righteously"* (1 Pet. 2:23.)

Conclusion

A long time ago the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers told Jackie Robinson, "No matter what happens, you must handle it in a 'Christ-like' manner." Today the Holy Spirit, through the Apostle Peter, says the same thing to us as Christians: "Because you are a Christian, you are called to handle unjust treatment in a Christ-like way." Let us rely upon the Holy Spirit to respond in obedience to the Lord's calling.