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First Peter 2:11–25

“Righteousness That Can Be Seen”

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~Introduction: Righteousness Is Something You Can Recognize When You See It~

As believers, we must always bring our righteousness closer to the teaching of the Bible.

A pitfall that can arise when aiming at righteousness is that we end up pursuing righteousness in theory or righteousness in doctrine. One’s own righteousness in the world of the head easily becomes a kind of self-satisfaction.

What is required of us believers is not whether we can argue logically, but the righteousness of character itself. It is a righteousness that anyone, if they continue watching that person’s daily conduct, will be forced to acknowledge at the level of sense. It has nothing to do with theory.

In this morning’s passage as well, Peter is seeking such visible righteousness. Moreover, it is not a recommendation like, “It would be good if you could do this,” but a command, “Do it.” He teaches that such righteousness should first appear in one’s attitude toward the king of this world, and then in one’s attitude toward masters as slaves.

Before that, however, Peter summarizes in one phrase the source of the believer’s righteousness.

Verses 11–12

11 Beloved, I urge you, as sojourners and exiles, to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.

12 Keep your conduct excellent among the Gentiles, so that though they slander you as evildoers, they may, because of your good deeds as they observe them, glorify God on the day of visitation.

~Background: The Situation of the Believers~

The believers to whom Peter sent this letter do not seem to have been people with a false faith. Though they had only recently come to believe, they appear to have had a noble and earnest faith. They had already firmly begun walking the path to salvation, and Peter seems to have written for the purpose of encouraging them. As evidence of this, in this letter he never once rebukes them.

However, it was not that the believers had no hardships. They were right in the midst of trials. One aspect of that harsh reality can be seen from verse 12. There was persecution such that they were called evildoers. That was the situation for these early Christians.

~The Battle with the Flesh~

Yet, from Peter's perspective, the real trial was not that persecution but the inner battle. Please look again at verse 11. From the expression "fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul," we can see that the battle is taking place within the believer. Being called evildoers was merely the occasion for that inner battle to surface.

Then what are these "fleshly lusts"? Looking at this passage, they seem almost to have personality, as if they challenge us to battle. This "war" refers to warfare—something that attacks continuously, aiming at our weaknesses. In addition, since they are "lusts of the flesh," they are connected with desire. This desire refers to cravings that are difficult to endure, such as hunger for food when one is starving. In other passages, this "flesh" is also connected with sexual desire, but generally it is portrayed as a temptation that is hard to resist.

Because the "flesh" is expressed in that way, some think it refers literally to appetite or sexual desire. But I take a different position: that this refers to the ego of fallen humanity after the fall. It is hard to express in a single word, but if I dare to say it briefly, it is the self-consciousness of fallen humanity. I see that it is described like sexual or bodily desire because the temptation to return to a life ruled by that self-consciousness is so strong.

The life we lived when we were fallen and separated from God—there is a powerful force that invites believers back to it. If someone injures our pride, we attack that person. We refuse to listen to others and try to push things forward according to our own convenience. We act concerned only about our reputation. The flesh wages war in order to pull us back into a world ruled by such a powerful self-consciousness. That is the situation, I believe.

What I want you to remember here is that this flesh is not Satan but a part of the believer himself. A way of life that has soaked into us does not disappear easily; it tries again to dominate the person's life. Peter says to abstain from it, and it seems that because they had already once been separated from it, now it is enough simply to continue avoiding it.

~Conduct~

Looking at the grammar of the original language, this is clear: the result of abstaining from fleshly lusts is what verse 12 calls "excellent conduct." If one continues to stay away from fleshly lusts, there will naturally be a daily life of noble conduct.

Concerning the last part of this verse—"they will glorify God on the day of visitation"—there are various interpretations of what "the day of visitation" means, but a strong view is that it refers to the day when those who are calling them evildoers are themselves saved.

Even if someone daily calls Christians evildoers, apart from that thought, that person is being made to realize that the Christian's conduct is righteous. And on the day that person is saved, he will glorify God who has transformed Christians into righteous people.

~The Missional Aspect~

In verse 9, just before this morning's passage, after saying that Christians are priests, Peter speaks of their mission: "that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

This "proclaim" should not be limited to words. At least in verse 12, it means proclaiming God's excellencies by one's conduct. "To become a person whom anyone, no matter who, would see as righteous"—that can itself become mission.

A person's conduct is more eloquent than any words and can be effective in persuading others. "I disliked Christians, but their daily conduct looked righteous to me, and I came to know that God exists." It can become such a thing.

~Abstaining from the Flesh Alone Makes One Noble~

Here we must not overlook that a believer does not appear noble by trying to act nobly, but appears noble as a result of "abstaining from fleshly lusts." Simply by ceasing the fallen way of life ruled by self-consciousness, one's conduct becomes decisively different from that of the world.

And it is precisely where the fleshly element of a person is most likely to appear that the believer is tested. If even in such situations the flesh does not dominate the person, he can truly be called noble. Fleshly impulses especially emerge in conflicts with others. In daily life, this includes conduct under the rule of a king and conduct as a slave. In a relationship where one side is overwhelmingly stronger, can one continue to obey as expected? Or will one's self-consciousness run wild and rebel? First, concerning the relationship with the king—verses 13–15.

Verses 13–15

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,

14 or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.

15 For such is the will of God, that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.

~Nero~

Emphasizing the historical context, some translations render "king" here as "emperor." The emperor at that time was even an object of worship as a god, and temples for emperor worship existed. The Roman emperor at the time this letter was written was Nero, and Nero too was worshiped. It is fair to say that Peter had this Nero in mind when he wrote this passage.

This Nero is famous as a tyrant. He was not the type like Hitler with a dangerous ideology, but rather someone eerie, seemingly not of sound mind. For example, Nero killed his own mother, and rather

than agonizing over whether to kill her, he reportedly planned how to do it in a spectacular way. From this alone we can see that he had an abnormal mind.

Eventually Nero targeted Christians. When a fire broke out in Rome, he claimed it was the Christians' doing and intensified persecution. These events occurred around the time this letter of Peter was written.

Therefore, Peter's command to submit was not issued without considering that the king could go out of control. Even having witnessed such tyranny, he says, "Submit."

He did not write something like "a theology listing the conditions under which one may rebel against the king" because of such tyranny. Rather, this command of Peter seems to be given out of concern that there might be those who would resist the emperor.

~A Defense of Authority~

Verse 14 unfolds almost as if siding with the regime, presenting the good aspect of the king. It almost sounds as if he is saying that if one rebels and is punished, it is self-inflicted.

And as if pressing the point, in verse 15 he teaches that the Christians' suffering is not an unforeseen event but God's will. "Doing right" here means obeying the king, and Peter teaches that by doing so, those who persecute will be silenced.

~Submit~

Here I would like to look briefly at the word "submit." In the original language, it is *hypotassō*. This word does not focus primarily on action but speaks of attitude. In the case of the emperor, it means always being mindful of the emperor's commands, continuing to desire to carry out the emperor's orders even when one disagrees, and not thinking that one understands better. If I may put it simply, it is like the attitude of a good child toward a parent.

~Silencing Ignorant Talk~

If one behaves in that way—with respect and with the will to submit—then it is said that one can silence the speech of critics. Naturally, that is because a servant-hearted attitude, when seen objectively, is noble.

Not looking down on others simply because one is a Christian, but thoroughly being a servant—that is also what verses 16–17 teach.

Verses 16–17

16 Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondservants of God.

17 Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

~The Meaning of Freedom~

The “freedom” here may be understood as freedom from fleshly lusts. Having been released from the life we lived when we were fallen, only then are we finally able to serve. The days of “being concerned only with oneself” have ended.

However, Peter is concerned that some may use “freedom as a covering for evil.” This likely refers to confusing “being saved and freed from fleshly lusts” with “being freed from the king’s rule,” and adopting the attitude that one need not listen to anyone but God. Yet here Peter shuts down that logic in a single phrase.

~From Freedom to Honor, Fear, and Love~

The figure of a free person can be seen as the original figure, the way human beings were created by God. It is the essential form of one who has become free from rebellion against God and from sin. That form is not rebellious; rather, it is the kind of person described in verse 17: “Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.” This is the figure of a human being set free from sin.

Two points about verse 17. First, it can be said that even if a fallen person tries to do these things, it is difficult. Only after leaving the world of fleshly lusts—the world of the fallen self-consciousness—does it become possible.

Second, these four commands—honor people, love the brotherhood, fear God, and honor the king—are all connected. A person who does not honor the king does not love the brothers, nor does he fear God. In other words, a person who rebels against the king is also one who rebels against God, and he cannot love the brothers, because he will always be making demands and complaints against them.

Continuing on, Peter moves to the relationship between slaves and their masters. Verses 18–20.

Verses 18–20

18 Servants, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are harsh.

19 For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.

20 For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.

~Slaves in Rome~

The word translated here as “servants” refers to slaves. First, I would like to look briefly at slaves in the Roman Empire.

It is said that in the Roman Empire one out of every three to six people was a slave. However, unlike what was once the case in America, it was not that people of a specific race were enslaved. Romans and foreigners alike could become slaves without distinction. The reasons for becoming a slave varied: being taken as spoils of war, repayment of debt, being kidnapped, and so on.

Slaves did not necessarily engage only in simple labor. Some became doctors, craftsmen, teachers, even poets. Nor did they always live under constant surveillance; they were able to go out freely. In fact, there were slaves who went to church.

However, there was also a cruel side. Many masters ruled their slaves through fear. If something displeased the master, he could legally punish the slave. If a slave ran away, a specialist in capturing slaves would be hired to seize and punish him. When punishing, whips were used, and those whips had metal pieces attached that deeply wounded the back. If even then a slave did not obey, he would be sent to the arena, or in worse cases, to the mines.

~Why Are There Those Who Do Not Show Respect?~

In such a context, one might think it would be harder not to show respect out of fear for one's master. Yet reality does not seem to have been so simple. Please look at verse 18. Peter exhorts them to "submit to your masters with all respect," which implies that he envisions people who lack such respect. A person who follows the lust of the flesh—that is, the self-consciousness that wants to do things one's own way—can act in unbelievably foolish ways.

Next, they are taught not to choose whom they will obey. Even if the master is harsh, it makes no difference.

~Peter's Principle~

The principle Peter states in verses 19–20 is simple and clear. If one is flogged because one is rebellious, that is nothing but reaping what one has sown. But if, in the course of obeying, one suffers sorrow and hardship precisely because one desires to obey a master whose commands one cannot agree with at all, that is pleasing to God.

~Asymmetry~

Here, however, I would like you to notice that it is not framed as "doing good or doing evil," but as "good" or "sin." Since "sin" is connected with the nature of the flesh, this does not merely mean rebelling against one's master; rather, it refers to the slave's whole being being fleshly and ruled by sin.

Also notice that of the sinner it says he is beaten, whereas of the one who does good it says he grieves and suffers. The righteous person endures not only physical suffering but also mental anguish—likely the sorrow that comes from conforming to a master with whom he does not agree.

In any case, it is said that suffering in a state without rebellious spirit at all is worthy of God's approval. We may see this as the trial spoken of in chapter 1. Whether faith is truly present is revealed in what attitude one takes toward a ruler whose views are completely different from one's own.

At the same time, this was also the reason they were called. It is not accidental suffering, but something within the sure guidance to walk the same path as Christ. Verses 21–22.

Verses 21–22

21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps.

22 He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth.

~The Footsteps of Christ~

Peter insists that the slave who suffers under his master is not walking a path merely “similar” to Christ's, but the “same path,” truly tracing His footsteps.

Throughout His life, Christ had no sin in His heart, nor even deceit on His lips. He was a pure figure with no sinful aspect at all. Yet we too are expected to walk the same way as that Christ. Now verses 23–24.

Verses 23–24

23 And while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.

24 And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

~The Jesus Peter Saw~

Verse 22 just before this, and verse 24 which we have just read, both draw from Isaiah 53. However, verse 23 is different. Moreover, only in verse 23 the tense of the verbs differs, as if speaking of Christ's habitual manner of life. I believe this reflects Peter's personal impression. That is, Peter, who lived, ate, and slept alongside Christ for several years, saw that even among companions Christ truly did not revile in return or threaten. Peter must have found such a Jesus truly mysterious.

~Suffering for Others~

Verse 24 confirms that Christ's suffering on the cross was for others. When we look back, when we are made to suffer by enemies, we rarely think for the sake of those enemies or for those around us. A powerful self-consciousness works within us, and we think only of ourselves. But if we too, even in

suffering, were able to think of our enemies and of those around us, would that not be noble? Now verse 25.

Verse 25

25 For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

~There Is No Meaningless Suffering~

Christ's anguish was for our sake. Looking back in this way, we can say that His suffering had great meaning. Then if we follow in Christ's footsteps, we may say that our suffering likewise has meaning. The suffering of believers does not go to waste; it surely has meaning. We should remember this.

At the same time, we should remember that the Christ who experienced that suffering even now, as Shepherd, guides each one of us when we are called evildoers.

~Application~

Now, today we have read Peter's letter. Finally, I would like to consider what we who live in the present age can learn from this passage when we deal with those who rule over us.

~The Importance of Submitting~

As we have confirmed, this passage speaks narrowly of "submitting." I think the reason is that whether we can submit or not tests whether the lust of the flesh still remains. In other words, this is not addressing a special circumstance of the Roman Empire, but something that concerns the very salvation of the soul.

Yet when we survey the modern situation, has there not been a tendency not to regard submitting as important, or even to think of submitting as something base?

~The Attitude of Commentators~

I do not know whether this serves as proof, but when I was studying this passage, I found something curious. When scholars explain the meaning of Peter's command, it seemed that they were, in effect, recommending the opposite of Peter's literal command.

In the passage that commands submission to the king, they first acknowledge that such a command is given, but then go on at length to teach under what circumstances one need not obey. The same is true in the passage about slaves. They acknowledge that it commands obedience, yet say that if the master does something immoral, one should resist. In a word, they read Peter's command as meaning: "Tell those above you what is right, correct them, and if they still will not listen, then accept punishment."

But is urging those above us to change really what Peter desires? Rather, what the scholars say seems to be precisely the reasoning of the rebellious person. Those who resist authority invariably assume that they themselves understand justice. Even in society, when dealing with juniors or subordinates, are not such self-righteous people the most troublesome and rebellious?

In other words, when I look at the opinions of scholars, they seem merely an extension of worldly thinking, an interpretation that follows the lust of the flesh. More than that, though these scholars think they are representing Peter's intent, I think Peter may in fact have had such rebellious people in mind when he commanded, "Submit."

Certainly, depending on the command, there may be cases where one simply cannot fully obey. But even then, rather than speaking against those above us, should we not as Christians hold the desire to obey somehow, and with an attitude of fearing our master, obey to the very limit? If we frame the matter in terms of "From what point may we resist?" we presuppose resistance, and the vector points in the opposite direction.

Ultimately, how far one submits is entrusted to each believer. But does not the modern age tend too easily to speak ill of rulers? At times it can even appear as condescending fault-finding.

When we see such a situation, Peter's words seem like words that the modern church needs. What we are to do is not resist, but fear rulers and submit as far as possible.

~The Situation in Japan~

Here I would like to think a little about the situation in Japan. First, concerning the Emperor: it is true that the Emperor has been deified. But Emperor Nero was also so regarded, and Peter commanded submission even to that Nero. Peter would not likely treat this as an issue. One might say that by submitting one indirectly participates in idolatry, but the taxes Christians paid in Rome were naturally used for temples of emperor worship.

Some complain about Japanese politicians, but compared to Nero, are Japanese politicians not rather mild? Peter does not utter a single complaint about Nero in this letter. It is said that in the end Peter was crucified under Nero. I imagine that Peter walked the same path as Christ and, until his death, did not utter a single complaint about Nero.

Then should we obey without complaint? Would that not be acceptable? Certainly, obedience brings much suffering. But if one suffers for doing what is right, that is pleasing to God. In the end, is not the problem that we try to eliminate that suffering?

~Righteousness That Can Be Seen~

When we are ruled by someone with whom we cannot agree, we must remember that our faith is being tested. Will we follow the lust of the flesh and choose the path of resistance? Or will we

choose the path that has cast off the flesh—seeking somehow to obey with respect? Can we walk the path of living without complaint, without even showing a rebellious attitude, grieving and suffering?

The former path is a world of self-satisfaction. Even if one argues logically that one is right, there is always something unseemly about it. The latter path is the one that appears righteous even in the eyes of others. When people see such conduct, will not some realize that this person truly does not belong to this world?

When we believed in Christ, were we not moved by His posture as He went toward the cross? In the same way, people are moved by conduct. We must not remain satisfied forever at the level of being “logically correct.” We must actually demonstrate an attitude of obedience to others and discipline ourselves toward “visible righteousness of conduct” that anyone can recognize at the level of sense.

“While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.” We desire to become those who walk that path of Christ.

Prayer: Heavenly Father God,

This morning we have learned what is required of those who live by faith, having turned away from the lusts of the flesh. Please grant that each of us may first be convinced that the Word we heard this morning is right, and may be transformed into those who resemble Christ.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.