

Follow in His Steps

1 Peter 2:13-25, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

May 22, 2011

This morning is Graduation Sunday, the day in which we celebrate the graduation of our high school seniors. We will be celebrating a little later with a pot-luck meal and each of the graduates will be receiving a gift from the congregation. But what message is fit for our graduates, and at the same time applies to all of us? We are actually following along with our sermon series looking at the apostle Peter's first letter. One which I believe to be very fitting, both to our high school graduates, and to all of us. While I picked "Follow in His Steps" as the title for this morning, another title for the message might be "Holy Submission."

"Submission," not a word which you will hear in too many graduation speeches in the weeks to come. Not a word which you will hear too much in our culture today. Most graduation commencement speeches are about finding your own purpose, fulfilling your dreams, being the best you can be or being a good leader. And there are elements to those speeches which are important. There is only one problem with speeches like that. That's really not who God calls us to be as Christians. While we emphasize freedom, individualism, and leading, Jesus emphasized servant-hood, submission, and following.

Peter begins our passage this morning, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake." There is a whole lot of meaning in that short little phrase, "submit yourselves for the Lord's sake." "Submit" is an action verb which means to yield to. "For the Lord's sake," implies that there is somebody in authority over our lives. For one to call himself or herself a Christian, whether or not he or she even knows it, they have placed Jesus as the authority or Lord of their lives. *None of us lives as his own master and none of us dies as his own master. While we live we are responsible to the Lord, and even when we die we die as his servants.* Rom.14:7-8

"For Jesus' sake submit yourself to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king (emperor), as the supreme authority, or to the governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." It doesn't say submit yourself to some authorities instituted among men. It says to "submit yourself to every authority." For us today it would read "President" as opposed to king or emperor. And it doesn't matter if you declare yourself from the same political party, or whether or not you even like the President or governor who happens to be in there. It just says to "submit yourself to the authority that has been instituted among men."

For those who question whether or not the United States had the authority to go and do what they did to Osama Bin Ladin, we find in our Scripture this morning the primary purpose of those who have been put in authority, "to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." Peter writes in a much briefer form what Paul writes in Romans 13:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves) . . . For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the

sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. Romans 13:1-5 (NIV)

Paul tells us in his letter to Timothy (2:1-2), "I urge you then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - (especially) for kings and those in authority." When was the last time you really prayed, made requests, interceded, and gave thanks to God for those whom He has placed in authority?

Individual Christians do not have the God given authority to seek retribution and to bring punishment on the evildoers, for Peter will tell us that a little later in chapter 3(v.9), "Do not repay evil for evil." The same way Paul tells us in Romans 12, before we get to chapter 13. However, governments have been given that authority. The challenge becomes, when a Christian is working for the government, whether it be in the military, or as a police officer, or in the prison system, or as a judge, is he/she exerting his/her authority as a Christian or as a representative of the government? That is a difficult question to answer. Mennonites and Anabaptists have traditionally opted to try and not put themselves in that position.

But for Peter, and for Paul, (and even for Mary), since we're going there, Mary, the one whom said, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you will." For Peter, Paul and Mary "submission," is much bigger than that. "Submission to the authorities" whom God has placed in power, is just one of the elements.

Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants (slaves) of God. 1 Peter 2:16 (NIV)

"You are not slaves; you are free. But your freedom is not an excuse to do evil. You are free to live as God's slaves." 1 Peter 2:16 (NLT)

As Christians, we have been set free from the bondage of sin by what Jesus has done for us on the cross. But we are not free to do whatever we want. We have exchanged one type of slavery for another.

Wayne Grudem, a well respected contemporary theologian, writes in his commentary on 1 Peter, regarding verse 16:

"The kind of freedom meant is not specified, but certainly the great freedoms of the Christian life are freedom from the impossible obligation to earn merit before God by perfect obedience, freedom from guilt, and freedom from the ruling power of sin. None the less, Christians do not have freedom to do wrong! Though free in a greater way than anyone apart from Christ can ever be, Christians are still in another sense *servants of God* or 'slaves of God,' for they owe him their whole lives and their entire being. True freedom, true ability to choose and do what one wants to do, comes paradoxically in entire submission to God as his obedient servants."

As servants or slaves of God we have different obligations than others. Peter tells us what those are in the following verse:

Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.
1 Peter 2:17 (NIV)

Proper respect to everyone, love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, fear of God, and honor for the king or the emperor. That short verse should be seen as four commands. The Greek word used there where the NIV gets the words “show proper respect” for everyone, is the same word that is used to get “honor” for the king. As Christians we are called to honor or show respect to all people. We are called to a greater obligation to our brothers and sisters in Christ - “Love the brotherhood and sisterhood of believers.” And to an even greater obligation to God. Not only to honor and love God, but also to fear him. The more appropriate phrase might be “reverent fear” or “reverential awe.” *He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them* (Psalm 145:19). Fear of the Lord means that we are aware that He is God and we are not. It places Him over us as Lord, and we bow down before Him seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness. And then Peter returns to “honor,” or “show proper respect to,” the king or the emperor. Peter is telling his readers of that day to honor and show proper respect to the emperor, who at that time was Nero. The progression seems to follow:

Reverent Fear of God
Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ
Honor and respect for everyone Honor and respect for the king

Peter continues to build on the theme of submission by going so far to say that slaves should submit to their masters, “with all respect,” “not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.”

We need to recognize that the American experience of slavery has tarnished our view of slaves and masters. The slavery of black people in America, the self proclaimed “Christian” and “humanitarian” nation is one of the worst experiences of slavery that ever occurred throughout world history. Perhaps not that much different than the Israelites experienced in Egypt. That is not the type of slavery that existed when Peter was writing this letter. Although the mistreatment of slaves must have occurred in specific instances, 1st century slaves were generally treated well. There was extensive Roman legislation in place regulating the treatment of slaves.

But Peter says that even if treated harshly and unfairly, you still are to “submit yourself to your master with all respect.” Why?

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.
1 Peter 2:18:21 (NIV)

Most of the graduation addresses you will hear within the next several weeks will talk about finding your purpose. I recently finished reading a great book entitled Forgotten God by Francis Chan. The subtitle is *Reversing our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit*. In it he talks about

allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us. He says that often we focus so much on trying to discover God's will for our lives and his purpose for the future, that we neglect living for the day. Chan writes, "it's not that God doesn't have purposes and plans for our lives, or that he doesn't care what we do with our lives, it's just that He never promises to reveal those purposes all at once, in advance." He goes on, "There are very few people in the Scriptures who received their life plan from God in advance. Consider Abraham, who was told to pack up his family and all his possessions and start walking. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't know if he would ever be back. He didn't know any of the details we would consider vital (e.g. his destination, how long the venture would take, the costs vs. the rewards, whether he would receive a 401(k) or health insurance). God said to him go and he went, and that's pretty much all he knew." Jesus last words to his disciples, "just go!" "If you follow I will lead!"

Francis Chan offers us church Christians quite a challenge:

"Nowhere in Scripture do I see a 'balanced life with a little bit of God added in' as an ideal to emulate. Yet when I look at our churches, this is exactly what I see: a lot of people who have added Jesus to their lives. People who have, in a sense, asked Him to join them on *their* life journey, to *follow* wherever *they* feel they should go, rather than following Him as we are commanded. The God of the universe is not something we can just add to our lives and keep on as we did before. The Spirit who raised Christ from the dead is not someone who we can just call on when we want a little extra power in our lives. Jesus Christ did not die in order to follow *us*. He died and rose again so that we would forget everything else and follow Him to the cross, to true Life." Forgotten God, p. 121-122

This really is a great letter by Peter. Written by the one whom Jesus first said, "come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 3:19). And Peter dropped everything and followed Jesus, not having any idea where he was going. The same Peter who would later say to Jesus, "you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," and Jesus would reply, "yes, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. . ." (Matthew 16:16-18). The same Peter, who when reinstated by Jesus after vowing his true love to him, Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you don't want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death in which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" (John 21:17-19)

Peter learned how to follow Jesus the only place he could. By following in His (Jesus') Steps. And while he himself would lead many early Christians to Jesus, Peter would follow Jesus to the cross. Tradition has it that Peter himself would die on the cross at the hands of the Roman emperor Nero, the same emperor Peter commanded Jesus' followers to submit to and show proper respect to. The only account of Peter's death, by the historian Hegesippus, says that Peter actually had Nero crucify him in an upside down position, because he did not consider himself worthy to be crucified in the same position as his Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ.

Jesus had told Peter (and the other disciples) many years earlier:

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”

Luke 9:23-24 (NIV)

“If you follow I will lead.”