

Social Relationships



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Pet. 2:13–23; 1 Pet. 3:1–7; 1 Cor. 7:12–16; Gal. 3:27, 28; Acts 5:27–32; Lev. 19:18.*

Memory Text: “Above all things have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins’ ” (*1 Peter 4:8, NKJV*).

Peter's letter also tackles head-on some of the difficult social questions of his time. For instance, how should Christians live with an oppressive and corrupt government, such as what most of them experienced then: the pagan Roman Empire? What did Peter tell his readers, and what do his words mean to us today?

How should Christian slaves react when their masters treat them harshly and unjustly? Though modern employer-employee relationships are different from that of a first-century master-slave relationship, what Peter says will no doubt resonate with those who have to deal with unreasonable bosses. How fascinating that Peter points to Jesus and how He responded to bad treatment as the example of how Christians should conduct themselves when faced with the same (*1 Pet. 2:21–24*).

How should husbands and wives interact with each other, especially when they differ on a matter as fundamental as religious belief?

Finally, how should Christians relate to the social order when, in fact, the social and/or political order might be decidedly corrupt and contrary to Christian faith?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 22.

Church and State

Though written long ago, the Bible nevertheless touches on issues very relevant today, such as the relationship between Christians and their government.

In some cases, it's pretty obvious. Revelation 13 talks about a time when obeying the political powers would mean disobeying God. In such a case, our choice is clear. (*See Thursday's study.*)

Read 1 Peter 2:13–17. What is the Word generally telling us here about how to relate to the government?

The evils of the Roman Empire were well known to those living within its borders. It had grown at the somewhat capricious will of ambitious men using ruthless military force. It met any resistance with violence. Systematic torture and death by crucifixion were just two of the horrors it inflicted upon those it punished. The Roman government was riddled by nepotism and corruption. The ruling elite exercised power with total arrogance and ruthlessness. Despite all this, Peter urges his readers to accept the authority of *every* human institution in the empire, from emperor to governor (*1 Pet. 2:13, 14, NIV*).

Peter argues that emperors and governors punish those who do wrong and praise those who do right (*1 Pet. 2:14*). In doing this, they have an important role in shaping society.

In fact, for all its faults, the Roman Empire provided stability. It brought freedom from war. It distributed a harsh justice but a justice based nevertheless on the rule of law. It built roads and established a monetary system to support its military needs. In doing so, Rome created an environment in which the population was able to grow and in many cases prosper. Seen in this light, Peter's comments about government make good sense. No government is perfect, and certainly not the one that Peter, and the church members to whom he wrote, lived under. So, what we can learn from him is that Christians need to seek to be good citizens, obeying the law of the land as much as they possibly can, even if the government they live under is anything but perfect.

Why is it important for Christians to be as good citizens as possible, even in less-than-ideal political situations? What can you do to make your society better, even in a small way?

Masters and Slaves

Read 1 Peter 2:18–23. How do we today understand the difficult content of these verses? What principle can we take from them for ourselves?

A careful reading of 1 Peter 2:18–23 reveals that rather than an endorsement of slavery, the texts give spiritual counsel on how to think about difficult circumstances that, at the time, could not be changed.

The word translated as “servant” or “slave” in 1 Peter 2:18, *oiketes*, is used specifically for domestic slaves. The more usual word for slave, *doulos*, is used in Ephesians 6:5, a passage that gives similar advice to slaves.

In the highly stratified Roman Empire, slaves were considered a legal possession under the absolute control of their master, who could treat them well or cruelly. Slaves came from a number of sources: defeated armies, children of slaves, or those “sold” to pay off their debts. Some slaves were given great responsibility. Some managed the large estates of their owners. Others managed their owners’ property and business interests, and some even educated their masters’ children.

A slave’s freedom could be purchased, in which case the slave was described as “redeemed.” Paul uses this language to describe what Jesus has done for us (*Eph. 1:7, Rom. 3:24, Col. 1:14*).

It is important to remember that a number of early Christians were slaves. As such, they found themselves caught in a system that they could not change. Those unfortunate enough to have harsh and unreasonable masters were in particularly difficult situations; even those with better masters could face trying circumstances. Peter’s instructions to all Christians who were slaves are consistent with other statements in the New Testament. They should submit and endure, just as Christ submitted and endured (*1 Pet. 2:18–20*). There is no credit for those suffering punishment for having done wrong. No, the real spirit of Christ is revealed when they are suffering unjustly. Like Jesus, at such times Christians are not to return abuse, nor to threaten, but entrust themselves to God, who will judge justly (*1 Pet. 2:23*).

What practical applications can we make from what Peter wrote here? Does it mean, then, that we never stand up for our rights? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Wives and Husbands

Read 1 Peter 3:1–7. What special circumstance is Peter addressing in this passage? How is what is said relevant to marriage in today's society?

There is one significant clue in the text that enables the careful reader to work out the issue that Peter deals with in 1 Peter 3:1–7. In 1 Peter 3:1, Peter says he is talking about husbands who “obey not the word.” In other words, Peter is talking about what should happen when a wife who is a Christian is married to a husband who is not (even if the number who don't believe are few).

A Christian wife would find many difficulties being married to a husband who does not share her faith. What should happen in these circumstances? Should she separate from her husband? Peter, like Paul elsewhere, does not suggest that Christian wives leave their nonbelieving husbands (*see 1 Cor. 7:12–16*). Instead, says Peter, wives with a husband who is not a believer must live exemplary lives.

The roles available to women in the first-century Roman Empire were determined largely by the individual society. Roman wives, for example, had more rights under the law regarding property and legal redress than would most of the women to whom Peter is writing. But in some first-century societies, women were excluded from involvement in politics, government, and leadership in most religions. Peter urges Christian women to take on a set of standards that would be admirable in the context in which they found themselves. He urges them to purity and reverence (*1 Pet. 3:2, NRSV*). He suggests that a Christian woman should be more interested in her inward beauty than in the adornment of fashionable hairstyles, jewelry, and expensive clothing (*1 Pet. 3:3–5*). A Christian woman will conduct herself in a manner that will recommend Christianity to the one who lives with her in a most intimate manner—her husband.

Peter's words should not be taken by husbands as a license to mistreat their wives in any way. As he points out, husbands should show consideration to their wives (*1 Pet. 3:7*).

While Peter is addressing a specific issue—Christian wives married to nonbelievers—we can see a little of the ideal of Christian marriage: Christian partners should live in mutual support, living with transparent integrity as they worship God through their everyday activities.

Social Relationships

Read Romans 13:1–7; Ephesians 5:22–33; 1 Corinthians 7:12–16; and Galatians 3:27, 28. How does what Paul says compare to what Peter says in 1 Peter 2:11–3:7?

Paul addresses some of the issues raised in 1 Peter 2:11–3:7 in several places. What he says is remarkably consistent with what is found in 1 Peter. For example, like Peter, Paul urges his readers to be subject to the “governing authorities” (*Rom. 13:1, NKJV*). Rulers are appointed by God and are a terror to evil works, not good (*Rom. 13:3*). Thus, a Christian should, then, “render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor” (*Rom. 13:7, NKJV*).

Paul also emphasizes that women who are married to nonbelieving husbands should live exemplary lives, and as a result their husbands may join the church (*1 Cor. 7:12–16*). Paul’s model of the Christian marriage is also one of mutuality. Husbands should love their wives as Christ has loved the church (*Eph. 5:25*). Furthermore, he suggests that slaves should obey their earthly masters as they would obey Christ (*Eph. 6:5*).

Paul, then, was willing to work within legally mandated cultural boundaries. He understood what could be changed about his culture and what could not. Yet, he also saw something within Christianity that would end up transforming the way society thinks about people. Just as Jesus didn’t seek to bring about any kind of political revolution in order to change the social order, neither did Peter or Paul. Change could come, instead, by the leavening influence of godly people in their society.

Read Galatians 3:27–29. Though clearly it is a theological statement, what powerful social implications might this text have regarding how Christians are to relate to one another because of what Jesus has done for them?

Christianity and the Social Order

Despite knowing that human organizations and governments are flawed and sometimes sinful, and despite their bad experiences with governments and religious leaders, both Paul and Peter urged early Christians to submit to human authorities (*1 Pet. 2:13–17, Rom. 13:1–10*). Christians, they say, should pay taxes and contribute to compulsory labor obligations. As far as possible, Christians were to be model citizens.

Read Acts 5:27–32. What is the relationship between the obedience that Peter says to render to the authorities (*1 Pet. 2:13–17*) and what Peter and the other apostles actually did in this one incident?

The early successes of the Christian church led to the arrest of Peter and John (*Acts 4:1–4*). They had been questioned by the rulers, elders, and scribes, and then let go with a stern warning that they should desist from preaching (*Acts 4:5–23*). Soon afterward they were arrested again and asked why they had not followed what the authorities told them to do (*Acts 5:28*). Peter replied, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (*Acts 5:29*).

What crucial truth must we take from these words?

Peter was not being a hypocrite, saying one thing and doing another. When it became an issue of following God or following human beings, the choice was clear. Until then, Christians should be supportive and obedient to government, even if they also work to try to bring about positions of social change. When moral issues are at stake, Christians have been and still should be involved in legally promoting the kind of social changes that reflect the values and teaching of Jesus. How this should be done depends upon many factors, but being a loyal and faithful citizen doesn’t automatically mean that a Christian can’t or shouldn’t seek to help improve society.

Read Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 22:39. How might the command to love our neighbor as ourselves include the need to work for change when that change could indeed make life better and fairer for your neighbor?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Impending Conflict,” pp. 582–592; “The Scriptures a Safeguard,” pp. 593–602; and “The Time of Trouble,” pp. 613–634, in *The Great Controversy*.

Ellen G. White advocated that Seventh-day Adventists be good citizens and obey the law of the land. She even told people *not* to openly and flagrantly disobey local Sunday laws; that is, though they must keep the seventh-day Sabbath holy, as God has commanded, they don’t need to deliberately violate laws that forbid Sunday labor. In one case in particular, however, she was clear that Adventists should not obey the law. If a slave had escaped his or her master, the law required that the slave be returned to that master. She railed against that law and told Adventists not to obey, despite the consequences: “When the laws of men conflict with the word and law of God, we are to obey the latter, whatever the consequences may be. The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey, and we must abide the consequences of violating this law. The slave is not the property of any man. God is his rightful master, and man has no right to take God’s workmanship into his hands, and claim him as his own.”—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 201, 202.

Discussion Questions:

- ① In class, discuss your answer to the question at the end of Monday’s study about this issue: Should Christians *never* stand up for their rights? As you do, consider this one question, as well: Just what are our rights?
- ② What are examples in which the impact of Christians on society has been a powerful force in changing that society for good? What lessons can we take from these accounts?
- ③ What are examples in which Christians, instead of helping change the ills of society, acquiesced to those ills and even helped justify them? What lessons can we take from those stories, as well?
- ④ First Peter 2:17 says, “Honor the emperor” (*NIV*). The emperor at that time was probably Nero, one of the more vile and corrupt of what already had been a corrupt and vile line of men. What message does this have for us today? How might what Peter wrote at the beginning of that text, “Honor all people” (*NKJV*), help us better to understand what he was saying?
- ⑤ Read 1 Peter 2:21–25 in class. How is the gospel message encapsulated in these verses? What hope do they offer us? What do they call us to do? How well do we follow what we have been told to do here?