

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 teachings 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?

A Changed Life: Part 1

Monsurat, a teen from Nigeria, was curious about her neighbor. He didn't go to the mosque on Friday, and he seemed so happy. She wondered what made him so different. She greeted him when she saw him on the street and watched as he worked around his home. Finally, she found the courage to ask him the question that had burned in her heart: "What religion do you follow?"

"I'm a Seventh-day Adventist," he replied. Monsurat had never heard of Adventists. He offered her a book, *Steps to Christ*, and Monsurat accepted it. When she was alone, she took out the book and began reading it. Although her parents couldn't read, Monsurat knew that they would be angry if they knew she had a Christian book; so, she kept it hidden.

Monsurat studied in a boarding school and enjoyed it very much. Soon, she forgot about the neighbor with the strange religion. But when Monsurat returned home for a long vacation, she remembered her neighbor and greeted him. One day he invited her to visit his church.

"I can't go," Monsurat said, genuinely sorry. "I have special classes on Saturday to prepare for my high school exams." She saw the disappointment in her neighbor's eyes. "Wait," she said. "I want to see what your church is like. Where is it?" The man told her where the church was located. That Saturday Monsurat prepared for her class but went to the neighbor's church instead. She was curious to see if the other people in the church were as kind as he was.

The church members welcomed her warmly. She enjoyed the service, even though it was very different from the religious services she was used to. Every week Monsurat dressed for class but went to church instead. Because church ended about the same time as her class, her parents never knew.

Monsurat received a Bible and began reading it. She learned to pray as Christians prayed and asked God to help her live a good life. She had been somewhat mischievous, but she was determined that her teachers and dean would see a different person when she returned to school.

Back at school, Monsurat discovered an Adventist church an hour away by bus. She got up early on Saturday morning to catch the bus. She spent most of the day with the church members and returned to school in the evening. Before the year ended, Monsurat gave her life to Christ and asked to be baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *1 Peter 2:13–17*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that God has established various levels of authority in this world and that Christians are obligated to submit to all established authority.

Feel: Appreciate God’s system of order and authority and sense a responsibility to submit to it.

Do: Follow the counsel of Peter and the example of Jesus regarding how believers should relate to established authority.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God’s System of Order

A What does Peter tell us about our responsibility in view of God’s established order? (*Compare with Paul’s instruction in Rom. 13:1–7.*)

B What is God’s will for His people in regard to doing good (*1 Pet. 2:15–17*)?

II. Feel: Following Christ’s Example

A In what way does Peter set forth Christ as our Model in respect to how we should regard trials and the suffering they may bring (*1 Pet. 2:21–24*)?

B What does Peter imply by calling Jesus the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls? (*Compare with 1 Pet. 5:2–4.*)

III. Do: Proper Submission to God’s Order

A In light of 1 Peter 2:21–23, how should we understand Peter’s counsel for slaves or servants to submit to their masters?

B What is Peter’s counsel for husbands and wives, and what model does he cite in 1 Peter 3:5, 6?

▶ **Summary:** Peter describes God’s will in the ways in which a Christian relates to various levels of authority, doing what is right and good in order to bring glory to God. He cites the example of Jesus, as well as the example of holy women of old, as patterns for New Testament Christians.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 Peter 2:13–15*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: If we follow the example of Jesus, as well as that of other godly examples from Scripture, we will find that God has established various levels of authority to which we are asked to submit as appropriate, according to His will (*1 Pet. 2:15*) and “for the Lord’s sake” (*1 Pet. 2:13*). (Paul gives very similar instruction in Romans 13, Ephesians 5:21–6:9, and Colossians 3:18–4:1.) The believer is expected to model good conduct to the glory of God by submitting to the established authorities, whether in civil government, in work relationships, or in the home and church.

Just for Teachers: As the lesson topic is explored, it would be helpful to study the parallels noted above in Paul’s writings for the purpose of seeing the big canonical picture. Romans 13:2 speaks very severely about those who reject the authority that God has established and how they will be judged (*compare with 2 Pet. 2:9, 10; Jude 6, 8*). The class should discuss the ramifications of these counsels for all human relationships.

Opening Activity and Discussion: Have the class read together 1 Peter 2:13–15 and Romans 13:1–5. Discuss the parallels between these two passages and how they support and enhance each other. In what various ways do they introduce God and His will into the picture? Do these passages give blanket authority to individuals, or is the authority vested in the offices or positions they hold? Explain. To what higher authority are these individuals, in turn, expected to be in submission?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Compare 1 Peter 2:16 with Galatians 5:13. What point are these two passages making? What danger is there in thinking we are free from all restraint or law? See 2 Peter 2:18–20. Discuss with the class Paul’s argument in Romans 6:15–22 about the benefits of being a slave to righteousness as opposed to being a slave to sin. How does this line of reasoning play into the larger discussion in 1 Peter 2 about submitting to authority? Why does Peter end verse 16, which begins with “Live as free people” (*NIV*), by saying, “Live as God’s slaves”? How should we understand this antinomy (an apparent contradiction between two equally valid principles that seem to say dissimilar things)?

Bible Commentary

I. Employee-Employer Relationships *(Review 1 Peter 2:18–20 with your class.)*

After discussing submission to authority, in general, especially civil authority, Peter turns to the issue of servant-master relationships, which speaks to modern employer-employee relationships. The term *doulos* includes a variety of servant, or slave, functions but most commonly refers to an individual working to pay off a debt. In any case, the *doulos* owed loyalty, respect, and faithful service to the master for whom he or she worked. What the master was due was based not on how well the servant was treated but on the authority of the master and on the responsibility of the servant to submit to that authority. Submitting, despite harsh treatment, was considered commendable because it showed a consciousness of God as the ultimate Master or Authority (*compare with Eph. 6:5–9*).

Consider This: What effect will my relationship with my employer have on those who are observing my daily conduct as a believer?

II. The Example of Christ *(Review 1 Peter 2:21–25 with your class.)*

Peter insists that those of his readers who have endured suffering for doing good have been called to follow in the example of Christ, who suffered for them while doing good. “‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth’” (*1 Pet. 2:22, NIV*). Peter here quotes from Isaiah 53:9 as evidence that Christ was doing good, adding, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (*1 Pet. 2:23, NIV*). Then Peter borrows again from the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 53, concluding in verse 24 of his epistle, “‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed’ ” (*NIV*).

The substitutionary sacrifice that Jesus made for us places on us an obligation to behave with humility as He did and with readiness to suffer for doing what is right. Peter’s rationale, in *1 Peter 2:25*, explains that although in the past we were like sheep going astray, that we now have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls, and we have an obligation to follow in His steps, just as sheep do when they have meaningful relationships with the shepherd.

Consider This: Jesus endured suffering by maintaining His focus on the goal (*Heb. 12:2*). What goal can help us to successfully endure as He endured?

III. Spousal Relationships *(Review together 1 Peter 3:1–7.)*

Continuing the theme of submission to established authority, Peter now addresses wives, enjoining them to be submissive to their husbands. This counsel is similar to that given by Paul in Ephesians 5:22–33 and in Colossians 3:18, 19. Only here, Peter explicitly includes wives with unbelieving husbands, which broadens the application even further. He argues that husbands who are unbelievers may be won over to Christ, without a word, by their wives' good behavior and the purity and reverence of their lives (*1 Pet. 3:1, 2*).

Peter goes on to discuss the beauty of Christian character—"a gentle and quiet spirit" (*1 Pet. 3:3, 4, NIV*)—that wives should demonstrate, as opposed to external display of decorative hair, clothing, and jewelry. Then he cites the example of "holy women of the past" (*1 Pet. 3:5, NIV*), such as Sarah, who were deferential to their husbands and obeyed them, showing respect by doing what was right (*1 Pet. 3:6*). Finally, Peter addresses husbands who, "in the same way," are to be considerate of their wives, treating them "[with great gentleness and tact, and with an intelligent regard for the marriage relationship], as with someone physically weaker, since she is a woman. Show her honor and respect as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered or ineffective" (*1 Pet. 3:7, AMP*).

Consider This: The expression "weaker vessel" (*ESV, KJV*), in verse 7 of some translations, does not refer to physical or emotional weakness. It refers to finely made dishware. Very likely it is a reference to how men should treat women, behaving toward them as they would a valuable piece of china, which should be handled with great care and regard lest it be broken needlessly. The expression is a positive assessment of the value of the wife and the considerate and gentle manner in which she should be treated. How do we assess the value of women in our lives?

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How should we show honor for civil authorities who may not be behaving as they ought in harmony with the principles of doing good and punishing wrongdoing?
- ❷ Why is it not legitimate to use 1 Peter 2:18–20 to attempt to justify slavery?
- ❸ What specifics does Peter address in his discussion of husband-wife relationships?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: When Peter says in 1 Peter 2:17, "Show proper respect to everyone" (*NIV*), he identifies three specific groups other than the servants and masters and husbands and wives whom he subsequently addresses

directly. These are the family (of believers), the emperor, and God. God is at the very highest level and is to be feared or shown due respect and reverence, which would include worship. The emperor, or king (*KJV*), is representative of the highest level of authority on earth, and he is to be honored above other civil authorities. The family of believers is all those who are on an equal ground with ourselves, for in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one” (*Gal. 3:28, NIV*). We are to love this church family with the self-sacrificing love (*agapē*) of God and of Christ. How does this instruction encapsulate Peter’s intent?

Thought Questions:

- ❶ Why is it important for the believing employee to submit with all due respect to the boss or employer—even one who is harsh and unjust, as well as to the one who is good and considerate?
- ❷ How do I behave if I sense that I have been called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus in suffering for doing what is right?
- ❸ How do I focus on having a beautiful character rather than on external adornment? How did the holy women of the past make themselves beautiful, according to Peter?

Activity: Have the class discuss the specifics of Christ’s suffering for the sake of righteousness and the ways in which we can follow in His footsteps.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: In Paul’s discussion of submission to one another (*Eph. 5:21–6:9*), all four examples of how one submits involve relationships in which submission is one way and nonreciprocal: wives to husbands, the church to Christ, children to parents, and servants or slaves to masters. Husbands are never commanded to submit to wives, nor Christ to the church, nor parents to children, nor masters to servants. Authority and submission work only in one direction. This principle pervades Scripture, and it reaches into heaven (*1 Cor. 11:3*) and, in some ways, into eternity (*1 Cor. 15:28*).

Activity: Have the class create a chart representing relationships from Scripture that involve authority and submission, including relationships within humanity, between earth and heaven, and within the heavenly family. Note biblical passages that identify these relationships. Observe how they fit into the pattern of relationships as identified by Peter in this week’s lesson.