

May 3, 2020

Credit

Shepherd's Grace Church

For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

'He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Do you remember when you got your first credit card? Maybe some of you do not. Maybe some of you have avoided credit cards and have chosen to pay as you go. For many, credit is not all it is cracked up to be. It is a great temptation because there are so many opportunities to use it. There are so many great things out there and after all, it is great to have great things.

For some who have great discipline, they know however, that great things come to those who wait. Those who understand credit in the society we live in know that not using all your credit at a given time, or even maintaining available credit over long periods of time invites the people who extend credit to extend even more. People who maintain effective reserves prove themselves credit worthy and when you are deemed credit worthy, even though you have some credit still available those who make decisions about those kinds of things will give you even more.

It sounds oxymoronic but it is true. If you use all your available credit then you can't get more but if you don't use your credit, there is more available to you. In the world in which we live, at least here in the United States, credit is essential. I say it is essential because credit allows people to have things they might otherwise have to go without.

All those nice things I was speaking of just a minute ago... those are the things people do not want to go without. They are the things people work for, strive for, find sense of purpose for. Some of those things are clothes for children, shoes or even food. For some, credit means the ability to pay for college and a future for their children. For whatever reason, credit causes people to think about the future. It is that future that Peter and John want to direct us to this morning.

Peter begins the passage we are focused on this morning by encouraging us with an offer of credit. Actually, Peter is encouraging the first century Christians to whom he is writing. We have spoken of these people often in the past three weeks, but it is helpful to remember exactly who they are.

These are people who are scattered, isolated, separated from friends, family, loved ones. These are people who are having to do without because their world has been turned upside down and they find themselves in unfamiliar circumstances with a sense of unclear direction.

Some of these people have had to place themselves as servants to others to meet debts they incurred while trying to take care of their families. In the verse just prior to the passage we are studying today, Peter refers to them as slaves...at least in the translation of the Bible that I use to study.

It is unfortunate that my translation uses the word slave to describe the people to whom Peter is writing. It is even more unfortunate that other translations use the same word. Here's why.

The moment I use the word slave, we all start to focus on that word and the ugly and even horrific circumstances slavery created for millions in our country. As a result, and because all of you can read and many of you will read verse 18 as you consider the message I am sharing with you this morning, we must deal with two points.

First, we must deal with the choices made by translators who help us understand the words of scripture in our own language. The work these translators do is invaluable. Without them, many of us would never be able to read and understand the scripture at all. Their work, however, is subjective and necessarily compromising. Some of the choices they make are as a result of consensus and rigorous study.

The choice they choose to make in this passage is one of those decisions. The word slave is an option that many of the translators agreed to. There are other options, however. The Greek word they have translated is the word "Doulos. It does mean slave.

The word used in the Greek Septuagint however is "Oikoi" which means servant. If we can agree that the people Peter is talking to this morning are servants, it will help us get past the ugliness of "American Slavery" which we should not dismiss, but which, hopefully we can agree to engage more completely at another time.

The second issue is related to the first. Many of the people to whom Peter is writing today have entered into servanthood because of debt that they owe. They have provided for their families by incurring obligations for which they must now repay. The kind of servanthood they are engaged in is an obligation of time which, when completed, will repay the debt they have engaged in. So while they are not slaves, they have willingly agreed to subjugate themselves and surrender certain rights in order to achieve the freedom they cede in the future.

If this part of our conversation this morning leads you down a rabbit trail to the conditions of servitude which existed in our country during periods of our early history and you are unable to get past them, I do apologize for not dealing with those issues more completely this morning. I want to acknowledge them as heinous and despicable! I want to say that they should never have happened and I want to acknowledge that passages such as the one we are discussing this morning have contributed in part to their acceptability.

Biblical references to slavery are not the same as the kind of slavery endured by so many in our society but they have been used to justify the slavery that was practiced here. Our responsibility is not to ignore the events of the past or the scars it has left on our present. Our responsibility is to invite a present that offers possibility for a future where God's kingdom comes and where God's will is done.

I want to emphasize that it is never God's will to invoke pain or suffering on one person in order that another person might benefit from that hardship! God's Love for all people must be a present reality so that we can all move into a future where that Love is at the center of our existence! Credit is about the future and how we might be able to bring about the fullness of that love for all people.

When Peter says, "It is to your credit, if you are aware of God, if you endure unmerited suffering," we must be certain that we understand what kind of suffering Peter is talking about. Because of the inclusion of the words, "If you are aware of God" we can be certain that he is not talking about the kind of suffering that comes from intentional abuse.

Unmerited suffering at the hands of another person in order to exert power over the one who is suffering is never an act that leads to the awareness of God. If a person finds himself or herself in a situation where this kind of suffering exists, the person should do all in his or her power to extricate from that situation. Physical, mental or sexual abuse has no place in our society. It never has and it never will!

If we are aware of this kind of suffering in any form, it is our responsibility to attempt to eradicate the person upon whom the abuse is being inflicted. If we are unable to accomplish this task, it is our further responsibility to remove the abuser from the path of the abused person.

Peter addresses this when he reminds us in the very next verse that "if you are doing wrong and you endure suffering for that, where is the credit?" His intention here is to let us know that wrongdoing is never endorsed by God. God does not desire one person to punish another. Judgment is not for us, but reserved to God alone. (Rom. 2: 1)

God also does not desire that we serve as martyrs for a cause that is not God's cause. God does not want us to create our own agenda. Instead, God desires that we work to build his agenda. For us to suffer for wrong reasons does not

create right results. In this case, it is important to understand that both the one doing the punishing and the one being punished are not serving God.

So, where then do we get credit? What is the credit Peter is talking about? Again, remember to whom Peter is speaking. He is talking about those who are isolated, scattered, separated. Peter is speaking to us and is speaking to exactly the situation we find ourselves in this morning. He is speaking to a large segment of the population who find themselves engaged in a global pandemic.

Peter wants those who are feeling isolated right now to know that their isolation is to their credit. He wants them to know that when they separate for the good of their family, it is to their credit. He wants the ones who have loved ones in nursing homes suffering with dementia or other kinds of malady to understand that it is to their credit to struggle with the ones whom they love. It is to their credit to pray for them and engage in conversation with them. It is to their credit to reach out to them and to suffer, to struggle as they try to find a way to help them understand.

He wants those who are caring for the incarcerated to recognize that they are doing important work. He wants them to know that even though these people have made mistakes, they are still people of worth and they have an opportunity to participate in the coming of the kingdom of God as much as any other person. He wants those who are caring for them to suffer through difficult decisions regarding their care and value the work they have been asked to do. God wants them to know they will be credited with he struggle.

Peter wants those who stand up and speak out for compassion for all who are suffering with illness to know that they are using his voice and he will provide the words! In John 15, Jesus tells us not to make up the words ahead of time but to wait and He will supply! Peter wants those who are willing to suffer for the Lord's work to know that God will use them to finish that which Jesus has started.

Suffering therefore is not a matter of random acts of pain inflicted in random ways. It is a choice. To care for family, to care for friends, to care for the stranger whom you don't even know because you believe it is the right thing to do. These are the unmerited sufferings God gives us credit for.

God gives credit because it is the suffering who are so often forgotten. It is the poor, the lame, the blind, the dead and dying to whom Christ was sent

who are so often forgotten and those who are willing to take up their cause without regard to their own are those who will receive the credit.

One of my seminary instructors, Dr. Hal Knight, reminded me of how this works. In an article written by him, there is a story of Richard Allen, an African American pastor in the late 1700's. Allen was instrumental in helping others during the then "pandemic yellow fever attack."

It was thought that African Americans were immune to the effects of yellow fever so many were drafted to care for the whites who had taken sick. Many of these servants died caring for others who had little regard for them. Still, Allen recognized the value in helping. As Knight relates, Allen, an ardent follower of John Wesley's principles believed that a heart renewed in Love leads to a renewed love for God and for neighbor...for every neighbor.

Even though the neighbor has little regard for you, that does not diminish your responsibility to love them. When you love when love is rejected, when you help when help is turned away, you then emulate the actions of Jesus!

Peter tells us that the suffering you endure when you try to do what is right is in the model Jesus offers to each of us. When he was abused he did not retaliate. When he was made to suffer he did not inflict or even threaten suffering. Instead, he waited, trusting in the just judgment of God!

Several weeks ago, I talked of the book by Paul Tillich entitled "The Courage to Be!" Instead of becoming, Tillich reminded us of the importance of living, living in the now and not looking to the then. This morning, Peter is renewing the conviction God issues to us to live in the now. We are not to be a people who wait for the there and then to place our trust in God. We are invited to do it now.

If we are made to suffer because of our decision, Peter says we are in good company. In fact, he suggests we were called to this and the example is prepared for us. We are called to it not in attempt to gain credit for ourselves. There is no credit given for doing what is right. Our past sin has wiped out any kind of credit we might earn with that possibility. Our credit comes in a different way.

Our credit comes not from the work we do, but from the way we do it. Our credit comes when we understand what Richard Allen came to understand. When we renew our heart, we begin a new account. We start again and we hope we can make better decisions than we have made in the past.

The amazing thing about the new line of credit we have comes in understanding that our old debt has been paid. When we think of all the neat stuff we might want for our children, instead of having to worry about how we can ever afford them, we now reflect on how available they are. We no longer owe for what is in our past but can now live in the present because our debt has been paid.

As I said earlier, credit in our society is essential! It reflects our ability to have those things we desire most! In order to understand this fully, we must understand the nature of sin. Sin is the debt we enter into when we do that which is offensive to God. It is an act of knowledge and of commission. In Matthew, Jesus said, "Anyone who lusts after a woman who is not his wife has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

When we have thoughts of lust or adultery, or when we covet the possessions of our neighbor, we have already committed the sin in the knowledge of our desire for things which are not for us. When we actually commit the sin, when we enter into adultery or when we do not honor our father and mother, we enter into sin through commission. Both of these acts are repulsive to God who cannot stand to be in the presence of sin.

The problem is that all of us have committed these sins and many others and as a result, all of us have fallen short of the Glory of God! (Rom. 3) The bigger problem, however is that God desires to be in a relationship with God's people. "I will be there God and they shall be my people." God's desire in this case is so pervasive that it must be satisfied. Above all else, it must be satisfied.

In John 6, Jesus says that He has been sent to do the work of the one who sent him and that work is to recover all that the one who sent him originally created. In other words, God wants all who have fallen away to be restored to right relationship with Him. God wants all who have fallen away. He does not just want some but all!

In order for God's desire to be satisfied in this way, and because God cannot be in the presence of sin, God must find a way to restore the lost to an upright status that will allow them to be in His presence. Peter tells us this morning that Jesus is that way.

He has no sin in him which means he can stand before the father and stand on his own. No one else can do this because there is not one who is without sin except him. He does not try to deceive others or abuse his power in order

that they might be subdued. Instead, he places all his trust in God, the one who judges justly!

It is this absolute trust that enables what happens next. Before the foundations of the world, he was prepared (1Peter 1) God recognized the potential for human sin. Even then, even before we were created, God loved us so much that God worked out a plan for our redemption. He commissioned the second person of the trinity, the word to become flesh and empty himself of all deity. The second person agreed to this plan and trusted God completely for the fulfillment of the plan.

The plan was for Him, the one who was without sin to take on all the sin of the world so that the world might be redeemed from the sin. His actions were credited to our account with God and our accounts were marked "Paid in Full." Our sins were wiped away and our debt was no more. If you were looking at this in a worldly way, our Experian account would have gone from "bad" rating to an "Excellent" rating with the first pounding of the nails. When Jesus took all our sin into his body, as Peter explains, he took it all from us and enabled us to stand without sin.

Do you realize what that means? It means that we are now sinless in the eyes of God. The bad debt we accumulated in the past, in the present and in the future have been eliminated and we have abundant credit. In John 10, the passage we read earlier this morning, we are reminded that the world does not forgive our debts. "The thief comes to steal, to kill and to destroy." That which is worldly is of the enemy and we will be held accountable in the world for these transgressions.

That which is of God, however is that which Jesus brings to us. He takes away our sin so we can have life! In the world in which we live today, life is really the topic of conversation isn't it. Those who are interested in opening up the economy so we can return to business as usual are willing to trade life for financial freedom. They want a credit card with limits on it.

Those who understand the trade-off want an "American Express" card where there are no limits...where eternal life is the promise we all seek and where we understand that life is more important than anything. They believe that abundance can only come from God and not from a world in a hurry to gain a future filled with worldly things.

The challenge is not to belittle or berate either of these groups, or any group that might be in the middle. The challenge instead is to embrace the possibility of both groups.

Because of what Christ did for us on the cross, because we stand without sin, we are now called to a new life...a life of righteousness! We are called to a life that acknowledges the plight of some who find themselves without resources; and acknowledging the example of Jesus and of Richard Allen, renew our commitment to helping while they are hurting so that they might live in abundance.

Because of what Christ did for us on the cross, we are called to live in love with those who are experiencing death and dying during this difficult time! Some of them have to watch from a distance as loved ones die alone. Some of them die alone as loved ones watch from a distance. We stand between them and remind them that in Christ they are never alone! We are ambassadors because we have learned that Christ died for us and we really can do nothing less than give our all to Him! We cannot repay, but we can go forward, into the fields and we can meet others who are there and share the good news with them!

Before Christ we were wandering without direction. After Christ, after he has taken our sin away, we can now come in and go out to the promise of Eternal life! All of this happens when we have the courage to be! We no longer have to worry about whether we have open to buy on our credit card. We have been credit that is unlimited by the Amazing Grace of our Lord and Savior! "Don't leave home without it!" Amen!