

THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER - PART IV

PERSUADING THE WORLD BY GOOD EXAMPLE

I. Verses 11 and 12 of chapter 2 sets up the theme for the second major part of the letter, which involves giving good example to the world.

A. The verses once again refers to Christians as aliens and sojourners in this world. But it also adds a martial analogy to the passions as warring against the soul. The image is of the passions trying to gain control of the soul and the battle to conquer them.

- The fact that the passions are enemies does not mean that they are evil any more than the fact that the world is an enemy means it is evil. Rather, the passions must be converted and brought under Christ,.

B. Verse 12 then gives an additional motive for good conduct, that it may bring Gentiles (here the term for all outsiders) to glorify God. This idea is a theme from the Sermon on the Mount, i.e., that while one should not parade ones good works for personal credit, one should allow them to shine in the darkness. See Matt. 5:16.

- Outsiders may still speak ill of Christians, but the evidence will be against them.

- The letter speaks of conversion on "the day of visitation," which in general means the day of the coming of the Son of Man and of judgment. Wis. 3:7; Luke 19:44. There seems to be a reference to conversion possibly at the last moment because of the good witness of Christians. Or, possibly, there is a notion of the Christians bringing judgment to nations as they are bringing the Gospel, insofar as the nations future is decided by its acceptance or rejection of the Gospel.

II. Having said that Christians should be free of passions and of fear of persecution, the letter then says that there is a rightful obedience "to every human institution" because their authority comes from God.

A. This idea that authority comes from God reflects the words of Christ. See John 19:22. Jesus also said that there should be acceptance of rightful civil authority, but always under the authority of God. See Matt. 22:15-22.

B. As with a similar passage in Romans 13, the idea is not that all commands of all human powers should be obeyed, but rather

that human authority, even if imperfect, is legitimate, and there are obligations toward it.

C. It is assumed that the authority is "human" and, therefore, in the end from God, whether the ruler knows this fact or not. There is perhaps a subtle implication that authority can be from evil forces as well. See Rev. 13, 17-18.

- The letter does seem to indicate that the current Roman government is legitimate.

D. The hope is again that good citizenship will make it obvious that opposition to

Christianity is folly. See St. Justin, First Apology ch. III.

E. The letter supports freedom, presumably both from passions and from excessive social burdens, but for the sake of serving God more effectively. Freedom not used for God is wasted.

III. Having addressed the good and goal of freedom, the letter then turns to the difficult subject of slavery.

A. The slaves at the time were not always in poverty, nor were legally free people always really free. Nevertheless, the slaves could not leave their masters and had few legal rights.

B. The letter does not directly comment on whether slavery is acceptable or not, but rather assumes it in the background. However, in comparing slaves to Christ, it is affording them a certain dignity, and certainly by implication indicates that those who mistreat (e.g., beat, insult, etc.) slaves are acting like those who crucified Jesus. See Matt. 25:31-46.

C. As a practical matter, for slaves to run away or start of revolution was unfeasible at the time of the letter (probably the 60s.) Thus, the letter gives the best advice possible, to reverence the masters for the sake of God, rather than out of fear. See also Eph. 5:5-9; Col. 3:22-25.

- There is a message for any employee who is the subject of injustice, that Christ is there with the oppressed.

D. The letter then takes up the theme of Christ's sufferings as one of hope and strength in several ways.

1. First, if the master is unjust because the Christian is just, the Christian will gain merit before God. See Matt. 5:10-12. There is also an implication that some masters are going to be insulting and harsh regardless, so the Christian may as well give good example so that the punishment is unjust and the blame belongs to the master, with credit going to the slave.

2. Second, suffering for justice is an expected part of being Christian, and in fact, draws one closer to Christ. See, e.g., Matt. 16:24-26; Mk. 10:30; Luke 14:25-27; John 15:18-25.

- The letter quotes a prophesy of Isaiah regarding the suffering servant. See Is. 52:13-53:12. It says that we are called to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Thus, we gain confidence in the midst of injustice by the fact that Christ is there with us and that, as we follow Him in suffering, we are also following Him to glory.

- The letter does not say that one should never respond to injustice, but rather that the response should be Christ-like, in accordance with what will bring about justice, not simply satisfy anger.

3. Again referring to the Suffering Servant prophesy, the letter also reminds the

readers that Jesus suffered for our sins. There are at least two implications. First, if we have been forgiven of sins in a manner that gives us vastly more than what is just (nothing less than unmerited access to heaven and the company of the angels) we can bear with some injustices. See, e.g., Rom. 5:1-11. Second, it is a show of thanksgiving and repentance to Christ to join with Him in His sufferings.

4. The passage summarizes its idea with the image from Isaiah and Jesus Himself of Christ as the Good Shepherd going after us, His lost sheep. See Is. 53:9; John 10:1-18 See also Ps. 23, 80; Jer. 23:3; Ez. 34; Mi. 7:14-15.

IV. The letter then turns to wives especially of pagan husbands and then to Christian husbands.

A. As with the issue of obedience to pagan political authority, the idea is to insist on what is most important (i.e. the faith and good conduct) and give way on the lesser matters.

B. There is an almost exalted role of the Christian wives to bring their husbands to the faith. (That role would be played out in many instances, including the conversion of the kings of the Lombards, the Franks, the Visigoths when they came back from

Arianism, and many of the English kings.)

C. Wives are also called upon to defy social standards by refusing to emphasize fancy dress. This notion is the concluding theme of the Book of Proverbs. See Prov. 31. In Wisdom literature, the lady Wisdom is portrayed as a matron or maid who teaches and provides a good household. See Prov. 9:1-11; Wis. 8:2-16; Sir. 4:11-19. By contrast, in the Book of Revelation, the woman riding the beast, the symbol of decadence and oppression, is dressed in extravagant fashion. See Rev. 17-18.

D. The letter then gives Sarah as the model of a loyal wife. Without complaint, she went with Abraham to the Promised Land (and thus away from the wealth and prominence of Ur) and became the mother of the Chosen People.

- The passage does brush aside the fact that, when Abraham was first promised a child, Sarah came up with the idea of him having a child through her maidservant Hagar. The child Ishmael would later be rejected by Sarah when she had her own son. The message, however, is the same in the reverse direction. When she pursued an agenda on her own without consulting God, she got what she pursued, but it was not what was really good.

- As Abraham is a father in faith, so Sarah is presented here as a mother of good works especially when intimidation may be at play.

E. The letter then turns to husbands. In these marriages, both spouses are presumably Christian.

- Like Ephesians and Colossians, the letter gives complementary advice to husbands and wives, focusing on aspects that may be more difficult to carry out. In Ephesians and Colossians, St. Paul focuses the call to obedience more towards wives, who would be at home and thus more involved and desirous of running the home; the idea is that they should be willing to give way to their husbands' plans. See Eph. 5:22-24; Col 3:18. The call to love is more directed towards husbands, who would be more inclined to think that providing the income and defending the family is enough; here, St. Paul is calling for them to go further and show love especially in self-sacrifice. See Eph. 5:25-31, DoI. 3:19.

- St. Peter likewise calls for wives to be willing to give way to their husbands' plans for lesser things, as long as the faith and good works are preserved. He calls for husbands to show understanding and honor to their wives; the alternative would be treating them as objects or trophies, or trying to satisfy them by such things as the expensive clothes and jewelry that the letter has just condemned.

- The letter indicates that husbands need their wives for their prayers to be unhindered. This notion would have been rather contrary to both pagan and Jewish practices.
- In referring to women as "the weaker sex" (or more literally the "weaker vessel") the letter probably means having fewer social rights, or possibly have less physical strength. It certainly does not mean morally weaker, for the previous section has just referred to women as converting their husbands.

F. This section concludes that husbands and wives are "joint heirs to the gift of life."

- The letter emphasizes that living in the Christ-like fashion gives us an inheritance with Him. Here it emphasizes that the husband and wife are meant to inherit this life together, bringing each other to holiness. See Catechism 1641. Thus, while the marriage itself is no longer in force in heaven (or rather has been fulfilled in the wedding feast of the Lamb), see Matt. 22:23-33, a man and wife do still join in some way in their everlasting inheritance.

V. This section then concludes with unity, equanimity of spirit, and carefulness in prayer and speech.

A. As the concluding section in Romans does, this section begins by calling for a unity and mutual concern for others within the Christian community. See Rom. 12:1-13.

B. Also as with Romans, it calls for blessing those who curse one. See Rom. 12:14-21; see also 5:43-48. The idea is that, as one bestows a blessing on those unworthy of it, one receives unmerited blessing from heaven. There is a call to act in a Christ-like fashion in order to draw more grace from Christ.

C. The section finally ends with a quote from Psalm 34 indicating that purity and peacefulness of speech makes one's prayers more worthy of Christ. That Psalm begins as one of delight in the Lord, and confidence in his protection. It thus serves as a good introduction to the next section, which calls for a delight in taking on the opposition of the world, for that proves one's worthiness in the faith.