

The Privilege of Injustice

1 Peter 2:11-25

Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. We are currently in the midst of a three-month emphasis on one of our five identities as a church, our identity as Disciples of Jesus Christ. An identity is who you are down to your very core; it's who God has transformed you into. Another way to put it, a disciple is a person *who has been united to Jesus* and is characterized by the gospel advancing in them and the gospel advancing through them.

One of the many ways the gospel advances through a disciple is *discipleship*; it's multiplying more disciples of Jesus. Discipling isn't just the job of pastors or missionaries, it's a command and privilege given to all Christians. Unfortunately, most Christians never help make another disciple, or realize that they have what it takes, or even give themselves credit for ways they already have helped to make a disciple. A lot of times this is where church leaders shame church members and try to guilt them into taking action, but I think it's the church leaders who need to take action.

First, we need to lament—it's downright sad that so many disciples of Jesus miss out on the joy of something they were created for, to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with God's glory by being "spiritual parents" so to speak, guiding and nurturing new disciples.¹

Second, we need to equip our people.² And that's why part of this emphasis includes four-week trainings, one for men and one for women, on a simple, reproducible structure for discipleship. I was proud to watch how the men participated in the training with their God-given sense of fatherly guidance. And as the women kick off their training this Tuesday night I'm eager to see them realize the discipleship power of their God-given ability to nurture. May the Lord use these simple means in mighty ways!

At the center of all this is a three-month feast on the letter of First Peter in a series subtitled, "Everyday Exiles," which is simply another way of defining Disciples. I invite you to open your Bibles with me to 1 Peter 2:11-25, which you can find on page 1015 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. The title of today's message is "The

¹ Genesis 1:28

² Ephesians 4:11-12

Privilege of Injustice,” and the main idea goes like this: our identity as Disciples means a willingness to suffer unjustly as Jesus did. I think this passage points out three ways in which we might find ourselves suffering unjustly as we follow Jesus: Suffering unjustly as saints in verses 11-12, suffering unjustly as citizens in verses 13-17, and suffering unjustly as servants in verses 18-25.

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God’s word. Again, today’s passage is 1 Peter 2:11-25. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

¹³ Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. 1 Peter 2:11-25

May the Word preached here today echo in our hearts and among the nations. And all God’s people said, *Amen*. You may be seated.

Exposition

I knew something was wrong as soon as I stepped out of the truck. A man with murder in his eyes approached with a slight crouch in his shoulders, the kind of posture you

only see in predators about to attack. He circled us and spewed surprisingly coherent threats, accusations, and curses. Then suddenly he walked away, only to return briskly with a posse of violent-looking young men. Then he declared his accusations again, this time to the gathering crowd. Soon we were pressed tightly into a mob. Though the deranged man spoke nothing but lies, we were clearly taken as public enemy number one. We literally watched the facial expressions of others morph into his same grimace as he pointed at us and whispered in their ears. The police swooped in to arrest us, which was actually a saving grace—unbeknownst to us the crowd was preparing to turn our truck over and stone us in the street.

When we arrived at the jail we were directed to sit down outside. Our accuser immediately whispered something to a couple of boys and they ran away. In a few moments they returned with the local religious leaders. The man also whispered something to them. The longer he spoke the more the gentleness in their faces drained away. They shook their heads at us. Though they actually knew nothing about us, they walked into the police station with the growling man and reported every kind of false accusation against us. We were never questioned. After a few hours we were found guilty of causing the trouble the man had fabricated. The authorities told us to never return to the area.

This story was just one of the ways I experienced injustice while serving overseas. On a regular basis my teammates and I were called names, charged different prices, made fun of, groped, harassed, stared at, excluded, accused, cheated, and questioned. We were a minority by far. And we absolutely hated the helpless feeling of racism and prejudice. We hated it so much that we unconsciously developed our own subculture of not getting taken (which I didn't even recognize until I almost fought a taxi driver in an alley for overcharging me). We had an unspoken competition over who among us had stuck it to the man the most that week.

Why did we hate the injustice so much? Because we were all privileged. We were white, middle-class Americans. I'm not saying there's something wrong with being white, middle-class Americans; just that as such we had no concept of being a minority. I mean, we could all tell stories about being left out or treated unfairly, individual *instances* of being in the minority. But none of us could identify ourselves as meeting suspicion, accusation, and lowered expectations at every turn of our lives. In America we had only known the ignorant bliss of waking up every morning without insecurities about our race or class or religion. But we weren't in America anymore.³

³ Bradley Bell, "The Privilege of Injustice," <https://brokenmissiology.com/2014/11/25/the-privilege-of-under-privilege-missionaries-as-minorities/>

Why am I starting out the sermon this way? Because as a church that is primarily white, middle-class Americans, this point in First Peter is where many of us will begin struggling to relate. In most of what has led up to today's passage, Peter has laid out the rich theology behind our identity as everyday exiles. But from here on, he's going to describe its application to our lives.⁴

Here's the disconnect: although we can all logically understand the *concept* of an exile, many of us have no tangible experience of actually *being exiled*. In other words, many of us have no experience of being a minority, which is challenging since that's kind of how Peter describes the Christian life! In fact, one of the subtitles we considered for this sermon series was "A Chosen Minority" (which we wisely decided against due the confusion it might cause in the midst of current social tensions).

So what are we to do? First, we acknowledge all this for what it is. That in itself goes a long way and differs from the common responses of our tribe.

Second, we recognize, celebrate, and submit ourselves to diversity. One of the unique blessings of this church is there are people already in our midst, *and* surrounding us in this community, who have and still do experience literal exile and minority injustices. This is not just *their* problem, but *our* problem; and if we see it as such, then it becomes not just *their* experience, but *our* experience. In other words, instead of distancing ourselves in pride or shame, we draw near to listen and learn.

And third, we submit ourselves to the word of God and the sufferings it may well bring. Regardless of our race or class or experience, God speaks authoritatively to all his people; and he shows us through Peter that the kind of injustice suffered by Christians is unique to the privilege of our calling.⁵

I. Suffering Unjustly as Saints - vv. 11-12

I mean, who else in the world is called to be *saints*, to be set apart from the world as God's own prized possession?!⁶ This brings us to the first way we may find ourselves suffering in the footsteps of Jesus, suffering unjustly as saints. We read in verse 11,

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 121; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Loc 4056

⁵ 1 Peter 1:14-19

⁶ Titus 2:11-14

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 1 Peter 2:11

The language that Peter starts with here is more than just jargon; it was meant to help readers overcome their own disconnect. By using the word “beloved” Peter was making the connection that he wasn’t just the great pope far away, but he loved them dearly and identified with their struggles against the flesh.⁷ His own battle for holiness kept him humble, not holier-than-thou.

But he also uses the terms “sojourners and exiles” again, which made another connection: these scattered *New Testament* believers had much in common with God’s people of the *Old Testament*.⁸ Yes, from the very beginning the father of God’s Old Testament people, Abraham, was called to *sojourn*.⁹ And yes, when Moses led God’s Old Testament people out of slavery in Egypt, they were called to *sojourn* in the wilderness for a season. But the connection was about more than just being displaced. It was about living differently from the pagans among whom they were displaced. Listen to what the Lord told his people,

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God. ³ You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴ You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. ⁵ You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord. Leviticus 18:1-5¹⁰

What Peter’s getting at is *the Lord is still telling his people this*. It’s like, ‘Listen, I know everyone around you lives according to whatever their bodily urges tell them to. And I know there’s major pressure on you to conform to social expectations. But you don’t live by the pressure of society’s rules; you live by the privilege of God’s freedom.’¹¹

And so in our context, here is an interesting, good use for the experience of privilege many of us have had in America. As some of the most socio-economically privileged people in the world, we face the ongoing decision to wield our privilege only for our own good or also for the good of others. And it’s a war, right? Because a privileged society

⁷ Grudem, 121

⁸ Jobes, Loc 4056

⁹ Genesis 12:1; Hebrews 11:8-16

¹⁰ Edmund Clowney, *The Message of First Peter*, The Bible Speaks Today Series, Loc 904

¹¹ Jobes, Loc 4103-4128

naturally fights to maintain its privilege. Similarly as Christians, we are the most spiritually privileged people in the world. We have the forgiveness of sins and the power over the passions of our flesh—who else has that?!¹² Therefore we face the ongoing decision to wield our privilege only for our own good, indulging our bodily urges in the name of grace, or to wield our privilege for the good of others, namely, that God might be glorified and pagans drawn to him. Peter says as much in verse 12:

¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. 1 Peter 2:12

Simply put, if you're going to wield your spiritual privilege to the glory of God and the good of others, if you're going to be the saint God has called you to be, it's going to mean the death of you; and that in itself is part of what you suffer in following Jesus.¹³

But there's another kind of suffering that Peter has in mind here. And interestingly, it has something to do with people-watching. Got any people-watchers in here? You know what I'm talking about, posting up on a bench in a high-traffic area and observing people as they go by. You might think this is an American thing, but I'm pretty sure people-watching is universal, and especially when there are foreigners to watch.¹⁴ The only difference is the spirit in which it's done. It can be fun and innocent to people-watch. But it can also be cruel and condemning. When that's the case, it's not as enjoyable to be the people observed.

The reality for Christians is that we are a people constantly observed by others because we are, by nature, foreigners in a foreign land. And they observe us in ways that range from curious to cruel. Many would delight to see you stumble to prove the condemnation they already heap upon you in order to feel better about themselves. Whether or not people even say such things to your face, being people-watched is part of suffering unjustly as a saint. So Peter tells us to embrace this suffering by living honorably in the midst of it. This is similar to Jesus' teaching in his Sermon on the Mount when he tells his followers,

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. [Now, we usually

¹² Romans 8:1-14

¹³ Hebrews 5:7-8

¹⁴ Jobes, Loc 4128

assume that Jesus starts onto a new topic here, but there may be a significant connection as he continues,] ¹³ “*You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.* ¹⁴ “*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.* ¹⁵ *Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.* ¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* Matthew 5:11-16

Although it tends to get a bad wrap in a Christendom society, honorable conduct plus good deeds is a fantastic way to make disciples when you’re surrounded by pagans. It stands out.

It’s like Jason and Weston down at jiu jitsu putting chokeholds on guys like normal, but also being genuinely interested in the lives of others and speaking words that build up rather than tear down. It stands out, and it reflects beautifully on God whether or not others turn to Christ.

This takes us back to something Trey talked about in the opening sermon of this series. As everyday exiles we are “in Christ for the world,” a better way of saying we are “in the world but not of it”.¹⁵ Even though we are already seated with Christ in heaven,¹⁶ we are left on earth for a time as a gift *for the world*. German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the first to really help me understand this when he wrote,

*[The church] is the salt of the earth. They are the earth’s most noble possession, its most precious asset...As those bound only to Jesus, they are directed to the earth, whose salt they are...It is not for the disciples to decide whether they are or are not to be the salt...Those who have been called by Jesus and stand in his discipleship are, through precisely that call, the salt of the earth in their entire existence.*¹⁷

So it our suffering as saints that is meant to be turned as a blessing to the world. If that’s not following in Jesus’ footsteps, I don’t know what is.

¹⁵ Trey Moss, “Rejoice in Your Exile, 1 Peter 1:1-9,” 2

¹⁶ Ephesians 2:6

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditations on the Cross*, 80-81

II. Suffering Unjustly as Citizens - vv. 13-17

I know we just spent a really long time on only two verses out of fifteen, but these two verses really do set our route for the rest of the letter. Let's quickly then consider two more practical ways in which we're called to willingly suffer injustice as everyday exiles. First, suffering unjustly as citizens in verses 13-17. There we read,

13 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, 14 or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. 1 Peter 2:13-14

Although Christians are assured that their citizenship is in heaven and their true king is Jesus,¹⁸ they are called to live as submissive citizens on earth; and not just to the civil government of their country, but to "every human institution". One theologian applies this as all legitimate human authorities that make up a society, such as wives to husbands, children to parents, employees to employers, students to teachers, and so on.¹⁹

Patterns of authority are necessary for human life, and therefore are built into cultures by God, and therefore are meant for good. They are, in fact, a glimpse into the pattern of authority and submission within the triune God himself, as the Son is submissive to the Father, and the Spirit is submissive to the Son and the Father, and yet the Persons are equal.²⁰ It's why Peter includes the phrase "Be subject *for the Lord's sake*"; when we willingly submit to every human institution rather than being contrarian, we are a neon flashing sign pointing straight at God.²¹

Peter continues in verse 15,

15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. 16 Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. 17 Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. 1 Peter 2:15-17

Anytime we hear the phrase "this is the will of God," our ears should perk up, since we find ourselves eager to know what's in store for our lives. 'God, what is your will for my

¹⁸ Philippians 3:20

¹⁹ Grudem, 125-126

²⁰ Grudem, 125-126

²¹ Grudem, 127

life?' Peter tells us, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. Here it is: willingly suffer as Jesus did by submitting yourself to every human institution and doing good despite them. In other words, be a slave of God, which is the exact language used at the end of verse 16.²²

And before we take this as just empty descriptive words, we need to remember what was on the line. Peter, who wrote these words and finished the paragraph with "Honor the emperor," he penned them during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero. Not only was Nero the one who would soon ignite a massive persecution of Christians, but it would be under his rule that Peter himself would one day be put to death.²³ These were not empty words, nor did they apply only to good human institutions. My brothers and sisters, our "Christian freedom rests not on escape from service but on change of master."²⁴ We are freed in order to submit to every command that does not depart from the commands of Christ. And that will mean suffering that we willingly embrace.

III. Suffering Unjustly as Servants - vv. 18-25

In some ways you could say that Peter takes a step further to show us just how far this application goes. This brings us to our final consideration, suffering unjustly as servants. We read beginning in verse 18,

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 1 Peter 2:18-20

Here, Peter speaks directly to Christians who were servants or slaves. I use both terms because they were something of both in the first century. We don't really have a modern equivalent to compare it to. They usually weren't obtained or treated like slaves as we know it in American history, but they also did not have the basic freedom of an employee. There was extensive Roman legislation to regulate how they were treated, which granted them a clear social and economic status. However, that status was the lowest in society.²⁵

²² Jobes, Loc 4553

²³ Grudem, 127

²⁴ Jobes, Loc 4242

²⁵ Grudem, 131-132

The point is, Peter was making his application of willingly suffering injustice even to servant-slaves. Now, we know many Christians have used passages like this to justify evil human institutions, like the slaughtering of Native Americans and the slavery of African Americans. And that is a wicked misuse of Scripture. But it would also be a misuse of Scripture to say the Bible is primarily a book about the transformation of society at large. One of my favorite commentators, Karen Jobes, lays this out in a really helpful way. She says,

Peter both accommodates and subverts the existing social structures. Neither he nor any other NT writer mounts a frontal attack on the social structures of the time, such as slavery. But...“The call to follow the crucified Messiah was, in the long run, much more effective in changing the unjust political, economic, and familial structures than direct exhortations to revolutionize them would ever have been. For an allegiance to the crucified Messiah—indeed, worship of a crucified God—is [a] political act that subverts politics at its very core.”²⁶

She goes on later to say that the goal of the New Testament writers seems to be “the transformation of the believer regardless of one’s situation”.²⁷ So Peter here accommodates the Roman institution of servant-slavery and at the same time subverts it by telling the servant-slaves to willingly suffer injustice at their masters’ hands, all the while giving respect and doing good in the sight of God. Do that, and they show the masters don’t own nothing. And in doing that they model for all Christians what it looks like to be slaves of God.

Now, in light of modern social tensions someone might say to this white, middle-class pastor, ‘That’s a convenient way to dance around the need for justice and action.’ Maybe it is. But I’m not sure how else to adhere to the Scriptures without some sort of awkward dance between accommodating and subverting. Part of the brilliance of God’s word is that it doesn’t give us a one-size-fits-all formula for all times and places. Every context is unique and requires deep dependence on God as we figure out exactly what obedience looks like.²⁸

Conclusion

Thankfully, we have been given a living Word, Jesus Christ, who shows us the supreme picture of what this looks like. In verse 21 we read,

²⁶ Jobes, Loc 4481

²⁷ Jobes, Loc 4531

²⁸ Jobes, Loc 4298

²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 1 Peter 2:21

The word for “example” here “was used to refer to a pattern of letters of the alphabet over which children learning to write would trace. It suggests the closest of copies...Therefore the essence of our identity as [disciples] is a willingness to suffer unjustly as Jesus did”.²⁹

When I left for East Africa I thought I was ready to suffer unjustly as Jesus did. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Whether or not you have tasted the privilege of injustice, you do well to hesitate at the thought of boldly following in Jesus’ example of suffering. If this is the end of Peter’s message, then what a crushing command that only the most hard-headed among us will attempt.

But we’ve got *four more verses*.

Receive these as the tender touch of the Great Shepherd’s staff to lead you through green pastures and beside still waters, to restore your soul in our time of communion.³⁰

²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. 1 Peter 2:22-25

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and said to his disciples, “This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me.” He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, “This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord’s death until he returns.” **Today we are announcing that Jesus Christ saw it as just to suffer unjustly for you.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to

²⁹ Jobes, Loc 4642

³⁰ Psalm 23:1-3

your right. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember who you are and whose you are. If you're a believer but not yet baptized, before coming to the table, we would love to help you first come and declare your faith publicly through baptism. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back to talk and pray with you about any need you have. Let's pray.

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