

What Should Be Our Community Responsibility In The Midst Of Suffering?

by Ron R. Ritchie

In this election year, I keep getting mail from my friend, the County Clerk and Recorder of San Mateo County. His most recent offering to me was a sample voting ballot. I must wade my way through this document, despite the fact that I'm a citizen of heaven, an alien just passing through this land. As a resident of San Mateo County, however, I've got to select someone to vote for in both the Congressional and Presidential elections, the local elections, etc. I also have to vote on funding for the county jail, and on a measure concerning new prison construction. Apparently they need money for new prisons. The "salt and light" factor that Christians are supposed to demonstrate must not be working. If it were, we would need fewer, not more prisons. My sample ballot also wants me to become involved in something called "fish and wildlife preservation."

I don't know a thing about any of these candidates who are seeking election. Nobody asked me if they should run or not! Who are these people who want my full allegiance, anyway? If I really want to be serious about voting in the upcoming election, I'm going to have to spend a whole evening just reading the background information about them. Yes, during election time there's always the struggle to be faced, "Is all this really worthwhile?"

This is in line with the question we want to address this morning, "What should be our community--our civil responsibility--in the midst of a fallen, suffering world?" This was the question which Peter addressed to Christians in Asia Minor in his first letter, written in 64 A.D., in an effort to encourage them to become involved in their community in spite of all the pressures they were facing. Peter is seeking ways and means to shepherd these people in order to help them live as citizens of the Kingdom of God and citizens of the Roman Empire at the same time. That is the tension in which they lived.

Peter began his letter (1:3-2:10) by saying that although their present circumstances were very difficult, they should hang on and hold fast to the reality that Jesus Christ was coming again; that they were aliens and strangers, and as such, they should not get caught up in the turmoil of the world. In 2:11 to 4:11, the section we will look at today, the apostle instructs his readers on how to live in the world until Christ comes again. That was the tension they lived in, the same tension we live in in our 20th century world. Should we vote, or should we read the Bible? Should we vote, or should we go and minister in the prisons? Here Peter will bring a good balance for all of us.

What, then, should be our community responsibility in the midst of suffering? First, Peter says, "abstain from fleshly lusts" (11); secondly, keep your lifestyle above reproach among the Gentiles (2:12); and thirdly, submit to human government (2:13-17).

1. Abstain from fleshly lusts 2:11

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lust, which wage war against the soul.

Peter, the shepherd, addresses his flock with three different terms. First, he calls them "beloved." "I love you," he is saying, "despite the fact that you're not well received in this world. You are hounded, persecuted and harassed, but know that you're loved, greatly loved. You are treated unjustly in this world, but know that God will deal with you in perfect justice."

How we struggle when we are facing injustice! But we don't mind so much facing the consequences if we know in our hearts that we deserve what we're getting. When a highway patrol officer pulls you over for doing 80 mph,

smiles his big, broad smile at you and asks you for your driver's license, you know that justice has caught up with you. You were wrong, and that's OK. But we struggle when we're persecuted unjustly. Peter recognizes that, but he promises that God will one day deal with that in perfect justice. Don't react like you did in the past, before you became a Christian, when you are facing injustice. Don't react in malice and slander when your enemies in the community come down on you.

Peter writes out of a great wealth of experience in this area. After all, he was the one who drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. He knew what it was to react, to flare up in anger. But he had learned through that and other experiences that there was more going on than meets the eye. Thus he says to the Christians in Asia Minor to keep in mind, in light of eternity and in light of where they were right then, that they had certain responsibilities to the Lord and to their community, despite the instances of injustice they would inevitably face from the government, from society, and from their neighbors.

"Aliens," is the second term Peter uses to address these Christians in an effort to encourage them on how to live in their present tension. They are sojourners, Jews living away from their homeland, temporary residents without legal status. But, he says, check your passports. You are citizens of heaven; earth is not your home.

Thirdly, Peter addresses them as "strangers;" they are pilgrims who are just passing through. Abraham understood this truth. He "lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Thus, Peter encourages his "beloved," his "aliens," his "strangers," in light of their present experience, to "abstain from fleshly lusts"; to hold back, walk away from, and avoid all the things they used to partake in before they became Christians. They now had the power of the resurrected Jesus Christ, and the personality of the Holy Spirit, to enable them to avoid the things that no longer produced life. The world keeps beating the drum that all those things we were involved with in our past will bring us life and happiness, but we discovered to our dismay, that they brought only death. Rather than producing happiness, these things brought emptiness, guilt and fear, not the life we thought we would have. "Fleshly lusts" are all the temptations to our old, fleshly nature. When we reached out and took them, they only brought death to our body and soul. "Fleshly lusts" are the feeling of power you achieve when you finally were able to afford something the whole neighborhood longed for, but then you found you were king only for a day. All the toys that the world tells us we need, no matter how old we are--"You haven't really lived until you've got a Mackintosh"--are "fleshly lusts."

In the context of this letter, "fleshly lusts" for the Christians of Asia Minor were sensuality, immorality, drunkenness and idolatry. Sounds like Palo Alto to me! Two thousand years later, we are wrestling with the same problems. Here is how John describes fleshly lusts: "Do not love the world, nor the things of the world for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world." (See Colossians 3:5-10 and Galatians 5:19-21 for an expanded list of what constitutes fleshly lusts.)

Why should Christians abstain from these things? It is because our old nature, who we were before we became Christians, has mounted a full military campaign against our new nature, so that there is a war going on inside us at this very moment. Galatians 5 tells us, "But if you bite and devour one another, take care, lest you be consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh." That's the war that's going on inside. The more you become involved in these fleshly pursuits, the more intense the war becomes, as you are torn away from that great command of the Old Testament, "Be holy, for I am holy." Fleshly lusts will tear you down and waste your life away.

James 4:1-3 asks, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." What's the key to winning this battle?

The key is the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:12-13 declares, "we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh--for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit, you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Before we go out into the community, we need to look to ourselves by holding up the Word of God as a mirror to check our motives for wanting to move out and do good. Are our motives godly, or are they fleshly? Do they give us credit, or do they bring glory to God? This is a wise word for all of us in this season of suffering.

A few years ago, I really struggled over a lawsuit I was served with one Saturday afternoon. My son had been in a car accident--I wasn't even involved--and I was sued. A man came to my door, handed me a paper and asked me to sign it. I went back into the house, dazed. I was all alone with Ron Ritchie in the flesh, the lawsuit, and the Holy Spirit. The battle began. There were 10 charges in that suit, and of the 10, at least five were false, which only made me suspect the other five. The first round in the battle was, "Where does this guy live? There's going to be a hole in the ground when I'm finished with him! My son may have dinged his car, but he'll never find it again when I'm through!" Then a voice said, "Ron..." I knew that voice. I'd heard it so many times before. I said, "Yes, Lord." "What are you doing?" He asked. "I'm being fleshly," I replied, "How long do you want to go on like that?" "A long time!" It's so powerful, isn't it, this feeling of being in control, of relying on yourself instead of God because He acts so slowly in situations like this? But it just seems like a long time. Fortunately, the Lord won that day. That whole situation worked out very well for me as the Spirit of God took control of my emotions.

What should be our community responsibility in the midst of suffering? Before we can live and walk in a fallen world, we must understand life from God's point of view, to recognize the enemy of the flesh, and how we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, defeat that old nature that has no power unless we grant it to Him. Let us make the godly choice to walk away from, to abstain from and refuse to participate in those things that would destroy us--the things that Peter calls "fleshly lusts."

2. Keep your behavior above reproach 2:12

Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the tiling in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Be conscious of the fact that everyone in your community knows who are the Christians and who are not, Peter says; thus Christians should walk circumspectly, trying to see themselves from the point of view of non-Christians. As you walk this way, you will make them uncomfortable, because righteousness always struggles against unrighteousness. That is why you are not invited to some of their homes--you would make them feel guilty by just showing up. "Oh yes, you're the Christian. Cool it guys; I'll get him out of here. I don't even know how he got on the list." You're quietly moved to a corner of the room where you're harmless.

This is how Christians suffer socially. The people in your community would love to see you fail, because if you do, you have lost whatever reason you had to appeal to them to change. Why should they become Christians if it won't make any change in their lives? When they want to start all over again--in fact, to be "born again"--why should they listen to you if you are not living a lifestyle above reproach in the community? Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent children of God, above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world " Why? "So that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation."

In the first century, Christians were being slandered by being called cannibals, as they talked about eating someone's flesh and drinking His blood; they were accused of immorality and incest because they partook in love feasts, and because brothers and sisters exchanged a holy kiss; they were faulted for no longer buying idols from the silversmiths; they were accused of being home-wreckers and haters of society because they would not go along with the philosophy of the day.

The defense that Peter recommends to Christians to counter these charges is their "good deeds." Ephesians says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" We need to ask God to give us eyes to see these good works, hands to serve in them, and feet willing to walk towards them, because many times we would just as soon avoid them. Good works are almost always inconvenient. Have you noticed that they never surface at just the right time? You always have to become involved with people and circumstances you normally would never pay attention to. But Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:10). Do things in public in such a way that God gets the glory, not you. The lame man whom Peter healed at the temple jumped up and down praising God, not Peter, because he knew that God had intervened in his life. That should be our aim as we participate in good works.

What are some of these good works which will glorify our Father? The Scriptures are just loaded with illustrations. In Matthew 25, Jesus directed us to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, open our homes to strangers, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the prisoners. James 1:27 says, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Christians are to be peacemakers, to offer words of encouragement, and to be sensitive toward our communities.

I met a boy of 12 today. His name is Matthew ("gift of God"). His mother is mentally ill; his father has forsaken him, so an older couple from this church is raising him. At a time when they should be able to do whatever they want with their lives, they reached out and took Matthew under their wing. They asked me if I could find a "big brother" for him because they can't keep up with him. He wants a big brother who will trade baseball cards. Do you know someone at least twelve and a half years old who will be a big brother to Matthew?

Jesus also said, "Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:35).

So Peter reminds the Christian community that good works have an influence on the Gentiles. The very ones who slander them as evildoers will one day see that in reality they were not evil, but "good-doers," and they will not glorify you, but they will glorify God "in the day of visitation."

"The day of visitation" is a special drawing near of God to humanity, either for the purpose of judgment or mercy. In Luke 19:44, Jesus declared to Jerusalem the day of His visitation, predicting the destruction of the temple. That was a visitation of judgment. An example of a visitation of mercy was when Jesus found a widow grieving over the death of her only son, and our Lord raised him from the dead. The people attending the funeral of the son began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and, "God has visited His people!" In our context, Peter is talking about the second coming of Jesus, which will be a season when all men will see the good works that Christians have done and they will glorify God.

While I was attending seminary at Dallas, I worked at night loading tractor trailers. One night a fellow worker asked me, "If you were to start a church from the ground up here in Texas, would you allow Negroes to attend?" I replied, "Sure, why not? Mexicans, whites, Negroes--anybody could attend my church." He called a group of his friends over and said, "Guys, I want you to meet a 'Nigger lover.' Keep that in mind as we work together." Some strange things began happening on that dock to me and two other brothers in Christ from that day on. Boxes suddenly fell, driverless forklifts began coming at us. It wasn't fun to do good works among the men working there. We kept reaching out to them, hoping they would come to know Jesus Christ, and we made a covenant that God would use us and we would not react as we were tempted to. We saw several men come to know the Lord; we saw several families come back together; but when I left that dock, there were still some men who hated me with a passion because I would allow blacks in a church where there were "whites."

What should be our community responsibility in the midst of suffering? First, we should "abstain from fleshly lusts" (which creates spiritual warfare); secondly, we should keep our lifestyle above reproach (which creates

social warfare); and thirdly, as we enter the political warfare, we should

3. Submit to every human institution 2:13-17

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by Him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right, you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bond slaves of God. Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

Peter himself heard Jesus say, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). In that day, as well as the days when our Lord was ministering, the Jewish Zealots were notoriously rebellious against Rome. They held that there was no king for the Jews but God, and that no tribute should be paid to anyone but God. They did not believe in passive resistance, but thought that God would help them if they embarked on a campaign of murder and political assassination of Roman officials and of Jews who submitted to Rome. Their ultimate aim was to make civil government impossible. But Peter does not want his flock to become involved in any of that behavior. As citizens of the kingdom of God, they were living in tension; they were in the world, but not of it. They could not expect to enjoy all the privileges of the Roman Empire and refuse the responsibilities of citizens to pay taxes, help maintain order, honor and respect civil authorities and submit to human government.

The apostle wanted them to submit willingly. This was not an option, but a command, in line with God's divine arrangement to bring order out of chaos in a fallen world. They were to submit because that was God's desire for His children. He wants us to trust Him because all governments are appointed and controlled by Him. It's hard to believe that at times, but it's true. Romans 13:1 says, "Let every person be in subjection to governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God and those which exist are established by God" Psalm 62:11 says, "Once God has spoken; twice I have heard this--that power belongs to God." Everything starts and everything ends with God.

The basic principle here is that all authority derives from God. A clear example of that principle is found in Jeremiah 27, where the prophet is told to go and tell the kings of the surrounding nations, and his own nation, as a spokesman from God, these words: "I have made the earth, the men and the beasts which are on the face of the earth by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and I will give it to the one who is pleasing in My sight. And now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, My servant, and I have given him also the wild animals of the field to serve him. And all the nations shall serve him, and his son, and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings will make him their servant." Raised up in power by God, then taken down by God.

Peter is directing Christians to submit to authorities because that is pleasing to God. Get in line with God's divine arrangement for order, for that comes from His hand. Then the apostle lists others who derive their authority from God. First, there is the king (who at this time was Nero). He came to power when he was 16, pushed by his manipulative mother. When he was 17, he poisoned a friend at court. At 18, he plotted to kill his mother. Three times he failed at this; then he had her assassinated. Following the fire that destroyed a great part of the city of Rome, he persecuted the Christians unmercifully. Then his own Senate rebelled against him, but he forced many of them to kill themselves. Following uprisings in Britain and Judea, his own armies turned against him and he fled. The Senate condemned him to death in abstentia. Following 14 years as Emperor, Nero took his own life at 31 years of age, one of the cruelest men ever to persecute the Christian church.

But, Peter says, we are to "submit to the king!" God places kings in power, frequently for reasons we cannot understand, but we have to trust Him. Nero was a dictator who couldn't be voted out of power. Nevertheless, the Jews in Jerusalem sacrificed to God on behalf of the emperor, whom they regarded as appointed by God. In 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Paul writes, "I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of

all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires that all men might be saved." Here the apostle asks the Christian community to pray for political leaders in order that, first, they might live in peace; secondly, because that was good in God's sight; and thirdly, so that men might be saved. Christians have a stake in the eternal lives of their leaders.

Next, Peter lists "governors as sent by Him." God appointed the king, while the king appointed the governors who ruled over the various provinces. They had two functions: first, they were to "punish evildoers" (see Romans 13:2-4 also), and secondly, to "praise those who do right." So we have a second basic principle here, and that is that rulers are chosen by God to arrest corruption, to provide order, and to reward good. Romans 13 says that government is the minister of God, and all rulers are servants of God. That is why we are to treat them with respect.

Peter goes on to say, "For such is the will of God that by doing right, you may silence the ignorance of foolish men."

A Christian man in our community has decided that he is not going to pay his taxes, despite the clear command in Romans to "pay taxes to whom taxes are due." This man is doing business on a cash only basis so that the tax people will not know how much he earns. I told him he was a thief, a lawbreaker, a violator of the Scriptures; that as a Christian, people would point at him as one whose life was not without reproach. He got very angry with me when I told him this. He said to me, "You're a lawbreaker, too!" "I agree," I told him, "but I don't sit around planning how I'm going to break the law." At a law enforcement conference at Mount Hermon recently, a policeman told me he thought he would have a little fun at my expense so he did a computer check on my family and I. "What a disappointment," he said, "you came up clean." "Don't kid yourself," I said to him, "you just didn't catch me." I have struggles with road signs at 3 o'clock in the morning just as you have. What do you do when there's nobody there but you and a stop sign? I'll let you answer that.

Thus Peter encourages the Christian community to "act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bond slaves of God." Some of these Christians were once slaves, but now they had been set free by their masters, through the courts and through a variety of other means under Roman law. Use that freedom now, Peter says, "to become a bondservant of God." In other words, you have been set at liberty to become slaves of God, so go about your community doing what God wants you to do. Augustine said, "Love God and do what you please." If you love God, of course, you will do what pleases Him.

An added struggle here is that the "bond slaves of God" are all under the authority of the government, but there may come times when certain laws passed by the government will conflict with the law of God. We may have to come to a place where we will have to obey God rather than man, and suffer as a result, the physical, emotional and legal consequences. The Scriptures have many examples of this kind of thing, most notably the case of the prophet Daniel. Daniel was appointed by King Darius of the Persians to rule all of his land. His enemies did their computer check on him, but found him to be clean, so they passed a law that made it an offense to pray to anyone but the king. But the prophet openly went to his room, as was his custom, knelt down by his window in full view of everybody, and prayed to God, not the king. He was thrown in the lions den for breaking this law of the Medes and the Persians, but was delivered by God. He was willing, however, to lose his life rather than obey the law of the land. That's what Christians must remember; they may be asked to do the same.

Another example of Christians having to break the law of man in order to obey the law of God is in Acts 4, where Peter was arrested following the healing of the lame man. The disciples were forbidden to mention the name of Jesus again, but Peter's response to this law was, "We must obey God rather than man." As you know, the apostles Peter and Paul would ultimately forfeit their lives in the service of Christ.

A third principle here, therefore, is that in any given society, under any government, we are bond servants of God, and we are to submit to that government unless such submission violates the law of God. Today we hear a lot about the role of Christians in society and in politics, but some would seem to be getting away from the "salt and light" factor in Christianity and instead become pressure groups. Some would advise us to resist government by

various means when it violates its delegated authority. But that violates my understanding of the Word of God, because it creates a fear in people that God is no longer in charge of the affairs of earth. This is still a free country. We can still vote out of office corrupt officials; we can still attend and have input at the local political level.

Christians have a responsibility to help maintain order. To use force of arms to protect ourselves or to exert pressure on the state seems very foreign to these words: "Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses." Our weapons are "truth," which explains reality in a darkened world; "love," in a society where hearts have grown cold; "prayer," which will help us not to get drunk with fear and anxiety, and that God will strengthen or discipline our political leaders; "faith," that God is in charge; and "righteousness," as salt and light in the world until Christ comes again.

Finally, Peter lays out four commands for Christians who daily face the tension of living in this world while they are citizens of another. As bond servants of God, set free from the penalty and the power of sin, Christians are free to serve friend and enemy alike. Here are the apostle's commands:

- 1) "Honor all men." Treat all men alike, for all have been made in the image of God. In the words of C. S. Lewis. "We are all kings and queens under wraps." Our bodies don't show who God sees us to be.
- 2) "Love the brotherhood." Love each other with "agape" love, and keep on doing that to all, not just people who can respond, but all people.
- 3) "Fear God." In light of the principle that all authority is from God--kings and governors, etc.--keep doing good works and doing what is right. Become involved with government; bring justice, righteousness, peace and love, as vessels of salt and light--not pepper which irritates, but salt which arrests corruption and brings flavor to life, and light, which will illuminate the way of people who are living in darkness.
- 4) "Honor the king." Know that all of our leaders have been placed in leadership by God. Although voting may seem like a waste of time it's our privilege to partake in government.

Although the king may be a tyrant, God has appointed him as His servant for a reason. We must rest in that. When I looked at my sample ballot and found that the state wants to build new prisons, my first thought was, "If Christians were salt and light in the community we would need fewer prisons." We are surrounded by tremendous opportunities for good works. Let us pray that we will have eyes to see them, hands that will want to participate in them, and feet that will be willing to walk in them.

What should be our community responsibility in the midst of suffering? First, we should "abstain from fleshly lusts"--our personal responsibility; secondly, our lifestyle should be above reproach--our social responsibility; and thirdly, we should submit to all human institutions--our political responsibility. In this way, Christians can manifest the life of Christ to a fallen world until He comes again! "Even so Lord, come quickly!"

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