

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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An Unpopular Example

For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit. (1 Peter 3:17–18, KJV 1900)

Scripture often uses opposites to emphasize and to clarify a point of truth. Although we do not see the word "Example" in this passage, the message is clear. "For Christ also hath...." If we grasp even a minimum understanding of this passage, we will begin to understand Jesus' meaning in His words, "...take up his cross, and follow me." In the first century, a cross was not an attractive piece of jewelry that one might wear on a gold chain around his/her neck. It had only one meaning. The Romans executed criminals by crucifixion. Any reference to the word immediately reminded the hearer of that form of execution.

Today's populist and diluted forms of Christianity gloss over this point, and too many Christians of all stripes are quite happy to follow a similar course. How do we associate the then-universal symbol of execution--of the guilty at that--with authentic discipleship? Isn't that too severe a comparison? If we accept the Biblical truth of the matter, it is not at all too severe; it is the only accurate comparison. To further emphasize the character of Biblical discipleship, the believer who seeks to be numbered among "Disciples" of the Lord Jesus Christ must voluntarily "...take up..." that cross. In the cross analogy of discipleship in the gospels, Jesus emphasizes this willing disposition, both by the words "...take up..." and by His precise use of "...will be my disciple...." (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) Literally, He says that anyone who **will**s to be His disciple must also **will** to take up his cross. We do not become followers of Jesus by an irresistible, divine fiat, but by using the will that the Lord gave us in the new birth to consciously, **willfully**, and intentionally choose the path of discipleship. We can scan over these points and pretend that they aren't really as literal or as informative as they are unless we expand our study of Scripture that unpacks that truth by reminding us that Jesus' life and sufferings not only atoned for our sins and gave us an eternal inheritance with Him. Scripture reminds us regularly and clearly that we are to view Jesus' life **and sufferings** as our example. We embrace, at times with a certain reluctance that His caring kindness serve as examples for our conduct, but we carefully seek to avoid the obvious point of Scriptures such as the one before us that His sufferings also are to serve as our examples.

...if the will of God be so. No believer can doubt that God's will is true. This part of Peter's exhortation stands above question. Based on the accepted truth of God's will, Peter uses this unquestionable truth to remind us of an equally unquestionable truth. It is better if we suffer for right doing than if we suffer for evil doing. "Better" not only suggests a superior option for us, but it also underscores a morally right behavior in contrast with an immoral action. I suggest that the moral contrast is far more Peter's intended point than a mere convenient alternative for the believer.

For Christ also hath suffered once for sins.... When we study the Biblical doctrine of the atonement, of Jesus' sufferings, death, and (Never omit) resurrection for our sins, we de facto acknowledge that we are sinners who deserve punishment, but that He suffered for us to save us from that righteous punishment. He didn't suffer for His evil doing; He didn't commit any evil or sin. Yet He suffered. And Peter's point hinges on this fundamental truth. Just as Jesus' suffered for well doing, "...it is better..." that we suffer for well doing than for sins. Another point that we often overlook deals with the certainty of suffering. So much of this life is associated with suffering. We suffer various illnesses. We suffer from injuries to our bodies. We suffer from our own foolish and sinful choices and actions. Peter's point reminds us that suffering is inevitable in this life. We may complain at some suffering, "It just isn't fair." So what? Was Jesus' suffering fair by our human definition of "Fairness"? We complain about our "Unfair" suffering, but we rejoice at His. Do you see the inconsistency here? As long as we weigh every action by the "Fairness" scales of our human perceptions, we will stumble over our own feet. Where in this passage does Peter ground his teachings on whether this suffering is fair or not? He never mentions the point at all. He weighs everything that he teaches in the lesson by Jesus' example, not by the human gauge of fairness. Most folks could agree on the various settings where we complain against what seems unfair to us. Even if we accept that things are not fair, what difference does it make? The "Fairness" criterion helps us build a straw man of false paranoia. We can pretend that we or other righteous people are facing persecution. We can erect an endless list of faux

conspiracies and wicked schemes by which to justify our fake paranoia. More than once I've observed people who claimed to be persecuted, but their suffering actually grew out of their own selfish or foolish conduct. I've seen so many phony conspiracy claims that I inherently doubt them all. Often these claimed conspiracies serve as a convenient rationalization to polish our own self-righteousness or to justify our sinful and foolish actions. One particular experience stands out. Many years ago I knew a minister who claimed to have been repeatedly persecuted for his faithful adherence to Biblical truth. However, a careful examination of the man's life, attitudes, and actions revealed that he often said and did things that seemed like intentional abrasiveness to incite such actions against him. His own self-serving conduct produced the reactions of people that he dismissed as "Persecution" against him. No surprise, this man died a very lonely man. Factually, he was not persecuted. By his own attitudes and actions, he set up the criticism and rejection of people that he then dismissed as "Persecution." He sincerely thought of himself as a righteous soul being persecuted for righteousness. Few things ring as hollow as pretentious claims of persecution when the reality is that the person creates the appearance of persecution to ennoble his/her own sinful and self-serving conduct.

When Jesus was persecuted, how did He respond? The example that glares from Scripture's pages to us is that Jesus lived out God's spotless measure of righteousness because it was right. He willingly endured contradiction and blasphemy from wicked people, including wicked people who pretended to be religious, and "...he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7) How did He react to sinners' contradiction and evil sins against Him? He kept right on doing righteousness with grace. Instead of justifying wicked retaliation against those who mistreated Him, He prayed, "Father, forgive them...." How does this conduct translate into an example to us? When we actually do suffer at the hands of either wicked sinners or bumbling believers, we need to activate Jesus' example in our lives. We need to pray that same prayer, not shout about how we've been unfairly persecuted.

Stephen understood this truth. As he suffered the cruel, painful flows of large rocks hitting his body, and as he saw heaven opened and Jesus ready to receive him, how did he react to his persecutors?

And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:60 KJVP)

Jesus answered his prayer. The Jewish leader who supervised Stephen's death sees that same Jesus just two chapters later, and the Lord blessed that

man, Saul of Tarsus become Paul the Apostle, to write some thirty per-cent of our New Testament.

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust. How can we rise above our broken, self-centered humanity and speak kindly, even pray for those who mistreat us? If we look within our own inclinations and abilities, we'll certainly come up short. In the clenches of life's trials, we'll fail; however committed we think we'll be beforehand. However, if we maintain a sharp, steady focus of our faith's eye on our Savior and His sufferings for us, we'll find the kind of strength that Stephen manifests in his dying words.

Where do we find ourselves in this passage, *the just for the unjust?* He alone is that Just One. We are unjust in our conduct or as we stand before the piercing eyes of Him alone who is just. All the pretenses and false claims of persecution that might convince other believers cannot deceive Him for a moment. He knows everything about us—everything. Only as we integrate the reality of our sinful state into our thinking as His followers can we grow in His grace into strong, stable, and mature believers who learn at His feet how to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. (2 Timothy 2:3) If we humbly allow this truth to sink deeply into our hearts and minds, we'll rise above the pretenses of pride. We'll come to understand that the first and foundational step toward being one of His faithful followers requires that we take ourselves to the place of self's just death—take up our (Not His) cross.

...that he might bring us to God. We cannot come to be numbered among the faithful so long as we think that we in any way contribute to our transition from death in sins to our intimate fellowship with God. All that we may do is not sufficient to span that gulf. Only one event can bridge that chasm and bring once-guilty sinners with changed hearts and lives into fellowship with the Savior of sinners. All the redeemed in heaven sing one and only one song, "Thou art worth...for thou hast..." (Revelation 5:9) We only grow into fellowship with Him in this life when we willingly take self to the place of execution, take up that cross. Scripture consistently describes our conduct in godliness in terms of present blessings and fellowship with Him, never in terms of eternal merit or eternal reward. The death of self means that we must execute, kill, every ounce of our pride, the stuff that over values what we think and do.

I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. (1 Corinthians 15:31 KJVP)

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor