

Do what is right even if it brings suffering. Do what is right even if it brings suffering. Do what is right regardless of what others may think or do in response. I think that is what Peter is trying to encourage here.

If a friend asks you to lie on their behalf and you know lying is not right, what are you to do? Do what is right! If a friend asks you to do something on your way home from school or on Friday night and your parents have told you not to do it, what are you to do? Do what is right- listen to the rules set- there is a reason rules exist.

If a boss asks you to cover something up because “if the news got out”, and you know the truth, what are you to do? Do what is right!

If you see a person, maybe you know them and maybe you don't, getting bullied around or abused or verbally assaulted or treated without respect, what are you to do? Do what is right, even if that puts you in the way of a perpetrator!

If you are on a committee asked to fulfill a responsibility important to the future of an organization and stand face to face with a decision to ignore or hold accountable the actions of another, what are to do? Do what is right, even if you think or know the ripple effect of the decision may be a longer and harder journey than the one you took to get to the decision.

As followers of Christ, we are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus' example, and sometimes that means doing what is right even if it brings suffering. But how? How do we have enough courage to tell our friend you won't lie for them, or you know you aren't to do a thing that will break a rule? How do we have enough courage to inform a boss you have to report what you know even if that means they may face consequences and the rest of the company may label you as “the one”? How do we have enough courage to step into someone else's battle to help prevent further beating or struggle or violence, knowing that means we might get hit or attacked? How do we have enough courage to do what is right, even if we fear the result is going to be pushback and criticism and separation? How? The answer is short, and we are going to unpack it more, but God offers a way. That is how we do what is right even if it brings suffering. We may not always see it or understand it, but God offers a way.

Sadly, most of the world we know is measured in bytes and binary compounds. Choose 1 or 0. Choose 1 or 0 over and over again in countless combinations. This is the basic premise of our digital world. The one-zero choice rules our airwaves, computer screens, cell phones, almost every decision. Embedded even in our smallest moves, this theory drives our days without our giving it much thought. It informs at a deep level what we think is possible and what we think is not. Limited choices lead us to fall back impulsively to right-wrong, either-or, yes-no, fight-flight actions.

We see evidence of binary thinking across the spectrum of life. On the streets, one gang member's slight becomes another's death warrant. In the boardroom, one failed contract becomes the automatic justification for downsizing. In the schoolroom, one quirky learner quickly becomes labeled as a problem. In the family, one disappointment in a relationship becomes the foundation for divorce. In the church, one year of decline means the church is dead. In leadership, one bad outcome means the leader is incapable and can't be trusted. By and large, we work under the constraint of this mind-set all the time. I think we could refer to it as the "black and white" or "steep cliff" approach to life.

Embedded in this 1 Peter text is the subtle message that there are always more than two choices- that life is not as simple as the flip of a coin. One can be abused and not become a serial abuser. One can suffer ridicule and physical harm and not fall into a cycle of never-ending violent behavior. Jesus' experience on the cross teaches us that God always has options- life-giving options, options that expand possibilities and trigger in us instincts that only God can touch. As an antidote to all the ways life is frightening and dangerous, God offers a way... and it is an expansive way. (Joy Douglas Strome)

Here is the thing. Things in life happen that we can't explain. People do things. People suffer. We often ask why now, why this way, and why this long? And since we don't always know the reasons for our suffering, maybe hearing and knowing the purposes of God in our sufferings can help a little. With God, suffering is a call for us and others to turn, or repent, from treasuring anything on earth above God. Suffering is a call to trust in and rely on God and not the life-sustaining props of this world. Suffering is the discipline of our loving heavenly Father so that we come to share his righteousness and holiness. Suffering is working for us a great reward in heaven that will make up for every loss here thousandfold. This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Suffering reminds us that God sent his Son into the world to suffer so that our suffering would not be God's condemnation but his purification. God doesn't want us to suffer, but when we do, God works with us and offers us a way through our suffering.

Our world is broken. People, humanity, are lost. The world is not leaning on God's truth and God's way, but instead on our own understandings. And this is backwards. And in being backwards, there is a wrench in the gears of life. Chaos ensues all around us as war, as guns are recklessly being used to enact revenge on children and schools and workplaces and malls, as a battle of rights, as religious warfare, as drunken or careless acts take the lives of the innocent, as pills are seen as the answer to teenage anxiety and mental illness, as a fear-filled leadership fails to protect and provide. Our world is broken, and people are suffering. There are some who are trying to stand up and do what is right, only to be met with skepticism and disgust, only to be turned away, threatened to remain quiet, and even "handled" to preserve the order. Our world is broken, and people are suffering. The majority seems to be afraid to do what is right and just want what they want no matter what that means for others. As history repeats itself before our eyes, I can't help but ask, "How is that way, humanities way, working for us?" In short, it isn't, and we know it. So then, why don't we try God's way? God assures us it is better for us and everyone.

As we listen to Peter in his letter, and consider the context in which he is writing, we can learn a few more things. The 1 Peter 2 reading starts at verse 19 for today, but if you'll notice, the reading begins right in the middle of a sentence. Why? One thought is that a larger scope of the lectionary readings for today connects us to Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who protects and provides and ultimately lays down his life for us, his sheep. Maybe those who created the lectionary were trying to make this a Shepherd text? In the end of these verses Peter gets there, offering up Jesus as the ultimate example of someone who does right even if it brings suffering. We can connect this with Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, and Jesus as the good shepherd who can guide us along the way. But if we are going to understand this text fully, we need to widen the scope of the reading a little bit. Peel it back just one verse, to verse 18. What is the first word? "Slaves." That word alone can hit you right between the eyes. When we really look at the text, we see that Peter is directly speaking to people who are dealing with the ultimate form of oppressive powers and unjust treatment. These people are literally slaves. They are human beings who are owned by another human being.

What Peter suggests to them is that their world may not be as restricted and contained as they think. To suffer ridicule or abuse from their master does not ultimately determine their own self-worth. God will judge justly, both master and slave.

The context of Peter's letter shares with us that Christians who happened to be slaves in pagan households were being harassed for their beliefs. Living in a world where jumping to the master's every whim was considered acceptable behavior, these fledgling Christians had to add insults about their own belief to the list of ways that life was difficult. Peter seeks to offer a word of compassion and empathy and care. He does so by offering them a distinction between suffering for a just cause and suffering for an unjust cause.

Nowhere does Peter suggest that suffering is a legitimate condition for those who are abused, coerced, or oppressed. Nowhere does Peter suggest a stoic tolerance for violence against anyone. Nowhere does Peter suggest that God's name be invoked as the hand strikes, or the belt comes out, or the vestments come off. What Peter offers is an alternative ethic.

Suffering for doing good is thematic in 1 Peter, but this does not mean that Peter urges us to look for opportunities to suffer. Peter is not supporting the equation: the more suffering, the more commendation from God. Obedience to God and the gospel is the issue. Instead, Peter urges that rejection by humans is not a barometer of God's perspective, and such suffering will be undeserved. What Peter offers is that innocent suffering is a following in the footsteps of Christ.

Peter is intent on ensuring that any suffering that comes to believers comes because they are pursuing good, doing what is right, out of allegiance to Jesus, and not because they are doing evil. This repeated refrain across the letter presses us to examine and reexamine our ways of living in the world. The end goal is to actually change the perspective of the oppressive system. But we have to do it the way Jesus would do it, not the way we would want to do it.

Why would we do what is right even if it brings suffering? We live like this because Jesus did. If anyone had the right to fight back, it was Jesus. If anyone had freedom and power to bring about vindication and justice on his oppressors, it was Jesus. He could have called down the fire of Heaven and nuked every last one of them. But that isn't how God's Kingdom works. Jesus showed us the better way.

Jesus himself is an extended word and "living hope" for all those in dire situations. Jesus is the example to follow for these slaves and also for us. Jesus did not retaliate when he was maligned. He was innocent though insulted, and, even then, he did not respond in revenge. Instead, he entrusted himself to God, the final judge of all injustice, and that is something we, as followers of Christ's way, are exhorted to do.

We, as God's children, faithful to Christ's will and way, have been set free from sin. We have been forgiven and made clean, and given the knowledge that, no matter what anyone says about us, we are all equal and equitable and beloved in the sight of God. We have been set free so that we do not have to be right all the time. We do not have to fight back and return evil for evil. At what point in history has that ever worked anyway? At what point has demeaning another person actually made the demeaner better than? It doesn't and we know it, yet we still buy into it. Like Jesus, we can entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly. We are not the judge. We have been set free from judging and set free to love.

God always offers a life-giving option. We are called to find that option and live with it.

Two young boys were having a conversation one day. One boy was much bigger than the other. The bigger boy said, "I could beat you up." The other boy replied, "Yes, but why would you want to?" The conversation ended.

God offers a way to do what is right even if it brings suffering. God offers a way. Let all God's people say... Amen.