

## “Suffering from the Sin of Others”

March 26, 2023

Today we are wrapping up our series, “When Suffering Doesn’t Make Sense.” Last week we finished our study of the book of Job, and I have to say I think somewhat differently about Job now than in the past. While there is much we can learn about *suffering* from the book, Job is ultimately about *God, character, and faith*. David Allen suggested that “The key question in Job is not, Why do the righteous suffer? but, Do we worship a God who is *worthy* of our suffering?”<sup>1</sup> When we ask the question, Is God worthy of our suffering, that does *not* mean that we shouldn’t do what we can to be relieved of suffering. But what it does mean is that God is worthy of our trust even when suffering doesn’t make sense. In other words, the most important thing that happens in affliction is our response *to God* during the suffering. Because Job is ultimately about God in the end, we can conclude that **the primary application of Job is for God’s people to develop the kind of *character* that is shaped by *faith* in *God’s character*.**

So when we talk about worshipping our way through suffering what we mean is that as we walk through trials and afflictions of every kind, we need to proactively focus our minds and hearts on all that God is: Provider, Protector, Sovereign, Just, holy, gracious, merciful, all-wise, and all-powerful. And we do this with humble trust and a willingness to receive whatever God has for us, knowing that we may not fully understand His reasons, but that we can certainly trust His character. Yet this does not mean that we don’t seek solutions for our suffering. Trusting God doesn’t mean you don’t go to the doctor. It’s certainly possible to go to the doctor and *not* trust God, but the wise response is to trust God and go to the doctor. So worshipping our way through suffering means seeking solutions to our affliction, knowing and trusting that God is the only one who make any solution effective.

We have learned throughout our study that while it is ok to ask the hard questions in our struggle, we don’t want to be a position of contending against God or assuming that He is against us. But is there a place to

contend with our circumstances or even other people in our struggle? Last week I encouraged you to reach out to me with any unanswered questions you may be struggling with in regard to our study of Job. This morning my message is in part a response to those questions. I want to answer the question, **How should we respond to those whose sin has caused us to suffer?**

To say that our hands should be open to God in surrender and that He is sovereign over our suffering doesn’t mean we should have a fatalistic view of life and allow abusive behavior that can be stopped. In as much as there is a place for us to trust in God’s providence, and have compassion on those who suffer, there is also a need for us to respond to God’s justice as His representatives on this earth.

A quick survey of the NT will reveal that answering today’s question is not simplistic but requires discernment. This morning I want to remind us of four responses that we may have to those who cause us to suffer, each of which has a particular context to consider. We may be called to flee, confront, forbear, or forgive. Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 10:23...

1. **Sometimes the right response is to *flee* from those who cause suffering** (Mt 10:23-28; 2:13; 24:15-16).

There are times when we are *commanded* to flee from those who would cause us harm, particularly in the context of persecution. For example, in Mt 10:23-28 Jesus told his disciples:

“Whenever they persecute you in this city, ***flee to the next***; for truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes.

24 "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master.

25 "It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!

26 "Therefore ***do not fear them***, for there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known.

27 "What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops.

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<sup>1</sup> David Allen, Exalting Jesus in Job (Christ-centered Exposition), pg. 206.

28 "And **do not fear** those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather **fear Him** who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

This is an interesting passage in light of persecution, because Jesus does not say stop preaching the gospel. Rather he says, stop fearing man and *flee* to the next place where you can carry on the mission. Walking in the fear of God will sometimes mean fleeing those who seek to harm us without fleeing from our obedience to God.

You may recall how God commanded Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt with baby Jesus to escape Herod's vicious attack in Mt 2:13. Jesus later warned His followers that when they saw the abomination of desolation standing in the temple, they were to flee to the mountains. Sometimes God is providentially working to protect us as we flee from those who would do us harm.

This means that trusting God in our suffering does not mean resigning ourselves to stay in a place or position where we are subject to abuse from others. Unfortunately, the most heartbreaking example of this is in homes where one person is abusive to others in the family. Certainly there are a lot of sins for us to forbear in any marriage due to selfishness, irritability, or insensitivity. But when manipulation, control, or harm are used by one person to coerce or suppress the other, the relationship becomes abusive.

One of the questions that has been raised is, how might we think differently about suffering when it's in the context of abuse? I want to be very clear that when we talk about God being sovereign over our suffering it *never* means that we should allow abusive behavior to continue. In matters of abuse, the church's first response theologically and practically should be to the *justice* of God by confronting the aggressor and rescuing the abused—this is the right and most loving thing for the church to do.

For the one in an abusive relationship, removing themselves (or *fleeing*) from the abusive situation is a proper response to both God's justice and compassion. Sometimes this will even require using the criminal justice system, keeping in mind that civil government was established by God to enforce law as a reflection of God's justice (Rom 13). Crimes should be reported.

The one who is aggressive or controlling toward the spouse they were called to care for and protect, must realize that the uncomfortable position of facing discipline and accountability from the church or even the court of law is a mercy compared to facing God's justice directly. God *will* bring justice to bear one way or another.

On the other hand, the one suffering from abusive behavior needs to be reminded that God is especially compassionate toward the oppressed, He *will* vindicate them (Ps 10:18; 103:6), and the most godly response is *not* staying in an abusive situation indefinitely but seeking justice in the form of rescue for the abused, change in the situation, and accountability for the aggressor (tough love is a loving response).

So in the case of persecution or abuse, it is by no means wrong for a person to flee from those who inflict harm.

2. **It is appropriate for us to *confront* a brother whose sin has caused us to suffer** (Luke 17:3; 1Tim 5:1-2, 20).

Take note that we are talking here about a brother or sister in Christ. That's not to say that we should not confront unbelievers who sin against us, but the expectations and process may vary. In Luke 17 Jesus said, "**Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him**" (Luke 17:3).

Paul writes to the church in 1 Tim 5:20, "*Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning.*" This is tempered by what Paul wrote earlier in vs. 1: "Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity." That's to say the call to rebuke another for their sin is not open season without restraint. We are to exercise respect in the process of warning each other of sin's impact in our lives.

Yet take note that the most loving thing we can do is not overlook sin and its damaging effect, but firmly and lovingly calling one another to forsake the sin that either immediately or eventually leads to suffering.

3. **God may call us, for the sake of Christ, to *forbear* the suffering that others cause** (Matt 5:38-48; Rom 12:17-21).

**[Matt 5:38-48]** It's important to note from this passage that Jesus is responding to a misuse of the law by the Pharisees. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" comes from Deut 19 where the purpose was to establish parameters of justice. In other words, the punishment should fit the crime (and eye for an eye) but the punishment should not be excessive (a life for a tooth). So it's important to see that Jesus is not calling for an abandonment of justice when he says things like, "turn the other cheek." Nor can Jesus' teaching be used to justify personal revenge by taking the law into our own hands. The context of Deut 19 is for judges to act as a 3<sup>rd</sup> party to issue punishment as an act of impartial justice.

So what is Jesus promoting in Matthew 5? He's offering us a radical option to voluntarily and temporarily suspend our personal rights for the purpose of treating others as God has loved us in Christ when didn't deserve it. In other words, we are not bound to live vindictively like the world. Rather we are free to love others as God has loved us.

Why would we do that? Why would we respond with love toward those who want to insult us or take advantage of us? Because it is a way of imitating God's love toward us and modeling the transforming power of the gospel in our lives. *Jesus is calling us to be distinctively Christ-like in dealing with difficult people who seem bent on making our lives painful.* Jesus is *not* suggesting that we *never* resist evil in this world, which would contradict God's justice and undermine his teaching on how to handle sin within the church. Jesus' teaching does not suggest that one should remain in an abusive situation. Rather He gives us the freedom for the sake of the gospel to suspend our personal rights at times to demonstrate to unbelievers the radical love of underserved kindness. (It's right for us to stop someone from stealing from us if we can but in a situation like Pastor Joseph Tson found himself in, where the communist gov was confiscating his library to look for evidence against him and he could do nothing about it, he did have the power to be hospitable to his enemies with the love of Christ.)

- Turning the other cheek (39), means we can return personal insult with love rather than retaliation.
- Giving our coat to the one who sues us for our shirt (40) means that we can make love a higher priority than personal rights. That's

radical isn't it! Sounds like Jesus in Phil 2, where "although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself..." for undeserving sinners.

- Voluntarily going two miles with the one who forces us to go one mile (41) means having a character of honor that gives more than is expected of you. (selfless service that doesn't make any sense to the world)
- Giving to the one who wants to borrow from us (42) means not withholding our ability to meet another person's need out of self-interest.

This is how we love our enemies. We look for ways to respond to them that imitate Christ's heart toward us. So in this context, forbearing the suffering that others cause us means asking how we can extend mercy and love to those who don't deserve it as an expression of the love of Christ through the gospel.

But what about justice, you may ask? If we love our enemies, are we just abandoning justice? Paul answers that question in **[Roman 12:17-21]**.

The essence of Paul's teaching is that we can afford to love our enemies and do good to them in response to their mistreatment of us because vengeance belongs to the Lord, not to us. Don't miss how strongly Paul is making his point. "*Never pay back evil for evil...Never take your own revenge*" (17, 19). In other words, never get even. Forbearing the suffering that others cause us is not only overcoming evil with good, but also leaving room for the wrath of God. And in fact, God is the only one who knows the right portion of wrath and mercy that should administered in a given situation. In one sense Paul is saying, it's better to imitate God's kindness than to play God—than to usurp God's role as the only just Judge by seeking one's one revenge.

By the way, when Paul says we are to overcome evil with *good*, he may have in mind not only acts of kindness like feeding our enemy when he is hungry, but also using proper civil authority to resist evil. Paul uses the term "*good*" just a few verses later in Rom 13:4 to refer to civil authority as a tool in His hand—"bearing the sword" as a "minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil." So we can conclude from Paul's teaching in Romans 12 and 13 that sometimes overcoming evil with *good*

means acts of kindness and sometimes overcoming evil with *good* means using proper force to stop evil.

4. **We must always be ready to forgive those who repent of the sin that has caused us to suffer** (Luke 17:3-4; Mark 11:25).

Let's go back to Luke 17:3-4: "*Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him.*" Jesus is not suggesting that someone has license to continue sinning against you as long as the mouth the right words. His point is akin to what He said to Peter in Matt 18:21 when he asked Jesus how many times we should be willing to forgive someone for sinning against us? Jesus' answer was not seven times, but seventy times seven. The point is that whenever someone genuinely repents of their sin against us, we are called to respond with genuine forgiveness.

The question is, should we forgive if the other person doesn't repent? Notice that Jesus said, "***If he repents, forgive him***" (Luke 17:3). That's conditional. There can be no true forgiveness or reconciliation without repentance.

On the other hand, Jesus said in Mark 11:25, "***Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions***" (Mark 11:25). That sounds unconditional.

So how do we reconcile these two teachings of Jesus? Are we to forgive immediately and unconditionally for are we to forgive only when the offender repents? Mark 11:25 has to do with our vertical relationship with God. When we are praying, we are to have a heart attitude that is ready to forgive as a reflection of how God has forgiven us. In other words, we cannot use the other person's lack of repentance as an excuse to hold on to our anger, hurt, or bitterness. On the other hand, in our horizontal relationships with people reconciliation requires a transaction of repentance and forgiveness.<sup>2</sup>

Pride holds on to offenses and God is opposed to the proud. But humility is ready to forgive, and God gives grace to the humble.

So what have we learned about **how should we respond to those whose sin has caused us to suffer?**

- First, we are free to flee from those who are seeking to cause us harm.
- Second, we are called to honor God's justice by confronting evil where we can.
- Third, we are empowered to imitate God's undeserved lovingkindness by embracing the personal cost of doing good to those who mistreat us.
- Finally, we are called to forgive those who repent of the suffering they have caused us.

So how do we discern when to resist and when to serve those who oppose us? Well, that will require discernment and discernment always begins by responding first and foremost to God and His purposes rather than merely responding to people or circumstances.

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Lane, *Forgiving Others: Joining Wisdom and Love* (CCEF booklet), pg. 15-16.