

Submission and Suffering

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[0 : 00] I want you to turn in your Bibles to 1 Peter chapter 2. We're going to continue here, picking up in verse 18 after last week, leaving off in verse 17. And we're going to read just down to verse 21 this morning.

It ends, I know, in the middle of a paragraph, but I have good reason for stopping there because we need to spend all of next week pondering verses 22 through 25.

So we're going to stop short at verse 21 because I think 18 through 21 is going to be enough for us this morning. So I want you guys to stand with me and I'm going to read verses 18 through 21.

Peter writes, Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?

[0 : 58] But if, when you do good and suffer for it, you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 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.

Father, by Your Spirit, take this word and help us to see it clearly and respond to it appropriately. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is the second time in this chapter that Peter has told us that we need to be subject to someone or submit to someone.

It's the second of actually three times that he's going to say that, because in chapter 3, verse 1, he's going to turn his attention to wives and command wives to be subject to their own husbands.

And so three times here in this overall passage, chapter 2 and chapter 3, Peter's going to enjoin us in various spheres and areas of our lives to be in submission to those who are in authority over us.

[2 : 08] And as we saw last week, that basic command of submit or be subject, it's not that complicated. It's really not that difficult. The difficulty comes in when we begin to try to apply that in our own lives, when we begin to realize that we live in a very different cultural setting than Peter lived and these first century Christians lived.

So that last week we saw that there was a struggle, or at least I let you in on a struggle that I was having throughout the week of, how do we apply Peter's command to be subject to the Lord's sake, to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors sent by him?

How do we apply that sort of attitude toward the government in a democracy, in a republic, in a society in which we elect our leaders, in a country which was begun upon the basis of revolution against another government?

How exactly do you apply that passage? Do you approach this letter and do you approach the New Testament as a general rule and say, well, you know, they were a product of their times and we have moved beyond their understanding of the world, and so therefore there are some passages like this one that we can happily ignore because we don't live under the rule of an emperor, and so we don't have to deal with that.

Or in our passage today that addresses servants or slaves, slavery is now outlawed, thankfully, in our nation and in our western culture, so we no longer have to address these issues.

[3 : 49] We can just move right past all this business and ignore it altogether. There are a lot of people who would take that approach to passages like this. But I would submit to you that that's a very dangerous way to begin to think about the New Testament.

It is a very dangerous line of thought to pursue. I can remember, oh, 15 years ago or so, reading in books arguments against the biblical view of the roles of a man and a woman in marriage and the roles of men and women in the church, and reading that passages like chapter 3, verse 1, where

wives are enjoined to submit to their husbands, or Ephesians chapter 5, in which Paul says the same thing, or Colossians chapter 3, where Paul commands wives to submit to husbands.

I can remember reading scholars arguing that those passages were confined to the culture of the first century and ought not to be transferred to our world today, ought not to be applied in our marriages and instructions about male leadership in the church, ought not to be applied in our churches today because we've moved beyond that.

I can remember reading some scholars on the one hand arguing that, and then other more conservative scholars coming along and saying, no, no, no, that's not the proper way to handle the Bible. Those commandments are still alive and they are still applicable to us.

The principles that the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter outlined for us about the makeup of the home and the roles of husband and wives, those still apply today.

[5 : 31] And I remember distinctly reading in three or four different places where conservative scholars were warning against others, saying if you go down that path of dismissing these passages, it will instill within you a kind of approach to the Bible, a kind of way of interpreting the Bible and applying the Bible, that you will eventually begin to discard other pieces of the New Testament.

And I remember specifically, because I had to deal with this issue of gender roles, a number of scholars warning and saying, if you deny these passages about wives submitting to husbands, and you deny the distinctions and gender roles in the home, you're going, you're on a slippery slope, and eventually you will begin to deny more and more gender distinctions.

And you will come to a place where you begin to dismiss Romans chapter 1, where Paul speaks of homosexuality being unnatural. You will dismiss all the passages, 1 Corinthians chapter 6, and other places where those issues are addressed.

It's a slippery slope. To which scholars who were arguing that we should dismiss these passages, or at least not apply them straightforwardly, like chapter 3, verse 1 here in 1 Peter, to which they said, that's ridiculous.

We would never go down that path. We would never go that far because the Bible is clear on those things, so why would we go there? And now, less than two decades removed from reading those books and those articles, I can see some, not all, but some of the same scholars who said we would not go down that path, not going down that path.

[7 : 12] So it's a dangerous thing, I think, to approach the New Testament and the Bible as a whole with an attitude that says, we can quickly and easily dismiss parts of it because we've moved beyond that.

But then you come back to the question that we struggled with last week. If passages like this still bear the same authority over us in the 21st century that they bore in the 1st century over the original readers, what do we do with it?

How do we apply a command to be subject to the emperor or to the king is literally what it says, when we live in a nation in which we have no king?

There's no king in our country. So how exactly do we apply that? And I've wrestled with that. I wasn't finished wrestling with that when I finished preaching last week.

I wasn't finished wrestling with that issue when I concluded my studies for the week and said, okay, I've got the sermon that I'm going to preach this Sunday.

[8 : 17] I wasn't finished wrestling with that. It was still banging around in my brain. I was still struggling with it. And as I approached the text this week on slaves being submissive to masters, I could not let go of the connection between how do we apply be submissive to a king in a culture where we have no king would be submissive to your master in a culture in which we're not slaves and don't have masters anymore.

If I can't see how to do the one, then I cannot see how to do the other as well. And so I came, as I thought on this, as I meditated on this this week, my mind kept coming back to, in verse 13, to the emperor as supreme.

I kept coming back to this word supreme, which means highest, most exalted. It has the idea of being the ultimate authority in a place.

So Peter enjoins us in verse 13 to submit to government authorities, particularly and first and foremost to the supreme governmental authority.

And so I began to ask myself, who is the supreme governmental authority in our country and in a government that's structured like ours?

[9 : 38] I came to see that as the central question, the essential question, in order to properly apply this. And the answer that I felt comfortable with and I thought rang true with who we are as a country, and this is going to differ from nation to nation, but for us, it seemed to me that the supreme authority for us would be the Constitution of the United States.

So that would take the place of the emperor, take the place of the king in a culture like ours. And once that light bulb went off, actually went off while I was having lunch with a friend on Wednesday or Thursday, that light bulb kind of went off for me.

And I said, now, okay, I see better now how to apply that particular passage. Now I can see a connection between the first century command and 21st century life in America.

And the challenge with this week's passage is to approach it in the same way and say, where is the connection between slavery in the first century Greco-Roman world and Peter's commands to slaves here in our 21st century slave-free, or at least legally slave-free nation?

Where is the connection? First thing that we have to think through is, is what was slavery like in the Roman world at this particular time? What was slavery like?

[10 : 57] Because we have a history as a nation. We have a history steeped in slavery. And when we say the word slave, or when we say the word servant, we have certain images in our mind that are immediately conjured up, and we begin to think, if that's what it is, then I cannot fathom Peter, or Paul for that matter, not opposing such an institution.

Why would they not oppose an institution like that? Well, there are differences between the kind of slavery that we had here in America and the kind of slavery that Paul and Peter and the other apostles interacted with.

So, for instance, one difference is the simple fact that slavery in the Greco-Roman world, on the whole, was not race-based slavery. So you weren't automatically considered a slave because you had a certain skin color or because you came from a certain ethnic background.

There were a lot of different ways for a person to become a slave in the first century. You could sell yourself into slavery. If you owed a debt that you knew you would never be able to repay, you could sell yourself into slavery to the person to whom you owed the debt.

An impossible debt could be erased if you became a person's slave. Or you could become a slave if you were captured in war. So the Romans were constantly doing war at their borders.

[12 : 20] And so if the Romans were at war with the Germanic tribes and they conquered a particular region, they may come back with some captives of war and those captives would become slaves many times.

And then, of course, you could be born into slavery. Just like slavery in almost any era in any part of the world, you could have been born into slavery if your parents were slaves. There were a number of ways to become a slave in the ancient world.

It was not simply that you had been brought over to a particular region and if you looked like you were from this place, you were automatically a slave. So it differed greatly, in that respect at least, from the kind of slavery that we think of.

Also, in the first century world, a slave could be on various levels of the social ladder. Now, broadly speaking, they were considered to be very low on the social ladder.

But within slavery, you could be in all sorts of places. You might be, as a slave, you might be a doctor. You could be a physician and be a slave.

[13 : 23] You could be a highly trained professional. You could be a lawyer and be a slave. You could be any number of things and still be technically owned by someone else.

So that slavery did not necessarily preclude education and career advancement in the first century. So it's a very different picture than what we think of and what appears to our minds when we think of slavery.

But nevertheless, it was still slavery. It was still the ownership of one human being by another human being. And so I think that we should rightly look upon the slavery of the first century, acknowledge that it is in some ways not as bad as the slavery in our own nation's history, but also acknowledge that it is a thing to be condemned.

It is an evil institution in whatever form it appears. And so even with those things noted, we come back to the question of, why does Paul and why does Peter, why do they not directly condemn the institution of slavery?

I think they don't condemn the institution of slavery for the same reasons that they don't take the time to condemn the idea of a monarchy, a king, a despot, a tyrant.

[14 : 45] Remember that the Roman government was not a government that was, most of the time, favorable toward Christianity. It was Roman soldiers that nailed Jesus to the cross.

It is according to church tradition. It was the Romans. It was a Roman emperor who would condemn Peter himself to death on a cross. So we're not here dealing with a government that's friendly to Christianity.

So why do the apostles not take the time to oppose in their writings the system of government prevalent in their day? For the same reasons they don't take the time to oppose the system of slavery that was prevalent in their day.

Two reasons, I think. Number one reason is because it was so entrenched in the culture and so much larger than anything that they were able to do anything about that it would have been a waste of their time, a waste of their energies to oppose these institutions.

To oppose either of them would have been to immediately bring upon themselves the fury of the Roman government. It would have done no real lasting good for them to openly come out and oppose these institutions.

[15 : 58] But the other reason, and I think the far more important reason for us to understand why the apostles don't come out and outright condemn slavery and outright condemn these forms of government that we would recognize as tyrannical, I think the reason is because the apostles were not first and foremost concerned with social revolution.

They were concerned with the salvation of souls and the transformation of individuals. And I think that they knew and recognized that so long as they faithfully proclaimed the gospel, the gospel, if allowed to run its course, would eventually, in time, destroy systems like these.

The gospel cannot long tolerate a system of slavery if it is allowed to flourish in its full form.

It cannot. Which is why it is only a little over 200 years removed from the Reformation, from the recovery of the gospel in Europe, which occurred in the 1500s and 1600s.

The gospel is finally recovered after having been buried under so much church tradition for so many centuries. The gospel is fully recovered and gospel proclaiming churches are popping up all over Europe.

[17 : 25] It is only a little less than 200 years from the recovery of the gospel that we find slavery being outlawed in all its forms in Great Britain. Why?

Because that's the effect that the gospel has. In just a matter of decades, it can undo millennia of slavery. It took a little bit longer, but it had the same effect in our own nation.

There will always be, in the midst of these evil institutions, there will always be believers who are clouded by the culture in which they live and who cannot see the evil directly in front of them.

But that's no tarnishment of the gospel. It means that they're not fully seeing gospel implications.

But when the gospel runs its course, the gospel shatters these sorts of things. So that the apostle Paul, when he does finally address a slave owner, Philemon, about his slave, Onesimus, whom he owns, Paul says to him, Receive him back as a brother.

There is no need for the apostle Paul in the short little letter to Philemon to attack the institution of slavery. He merely needs to apply the implications of the gospel to the lives of Philemon and Onesimus and the fundamental relationship that they have as master and slave is dissolved and destroyed.

[18 : 51] Receive him back as a brother, the apostle Paul says. That's what happens when the gospel really comes to bear upon the lives of people who are affected by evil, wicked institutions.

So the apostles do not have to directly, openly oppose these things. In fact, the task of the apostles was to address the people to whom God had entrusted their care.

And it's no secret that in the early church, in the first century, a number, a fairly large percentage of the believers at that time were, in fact, slaves.

The apostle Paul says that God did not choose the wealthy and the powerful, those who were of great reputation in this world. He chose the weak, the lowly, the despised.

So it's no surprise that there were a large percentage of slaves within the church at the time in which Peter was writing. So Peter has a task here. He must address this large portion of the believers to whom he's writing, and he addresses them, and he tells them something very clearly and very plainly.

[20 : 09] He says to them, Servants, that is slaves, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.

Now I want to make a few observations about Peter's instructions to slaves here. First thing that I want you to see here is that he commands them to be subject, be subject with all respect. Literally what the text says is, Be subject in all fear. And if you ask fear of whom, the broader context makes it clear.

Because in the verse just above, verse 18, verse 17, we are commanded, all of us, to fear God. Fear God. We honor everyone. We love our brothers in Christ.

We honor the emperor, but we fear only God. Chapter 1, verse 17. If you call on him as father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear.

[21 : 14] So that when we come here to verse 18, and slaves are told to be submissive to their masters in or with all fear, the point is, in fear of God.

So that ultimately, your submission now, in the midst of this life, to your earthly master, is an expression of your submission to your heavenly father.

You are not doing this because you fear your earthly master. You are doing this because you fear God. And it's an expression of your devotion to your father who is in heaven.

How do we think of that today in today's world in which we do not have slavery? The closest parallel that we have to the kind of first century slavery that was prominent then is the employer-employee relationship.

That's the closest thing that we have. There are obvious differences. You can quit your job at any time you want. You couldn't just quit being someone's slave at any time you want. But it is the closest parallel that we have.

[22 : 19] And so in application of this principle to our lives now, we would want to look and we would want to say, in the relationship that we share with those who are in authority over us in our place of work, our default position ought to be to submit to their authority over us because we fear God.

Which means that our submission to those earthly masters, our submission to those bosses, like our submission to the government that we saw last week, is not ultimate.

It's not final. Only submission to God is ultimate. Submission to anyone else is under God. So that if a boss or a government official asks you to do something contrary to the Word of God, at that point you no longer submit.

At that point you resist what they've told you to do. So observation number one is that our submission to those in authority over us, whether it be a government official or a boss at work or someone else, our submission to those in authority over us, is not ultimately submission to them, but an expression of our submission to God.

And because of that, we never disobey God in our submission to anyone else. Second observation.

[23 : 45] We begin to get into motives. What could be our further motives beyond fear for God and expressing our fear? What could be our further motives for wanting to obey a command like this?

Why would we want to do this? Because we aren't people, nor do we live in a culture in which submission is natural and easy for us.

We are, first of all, sinners. And as sinners, we are wired for rebellion. That's exactly what happened in the garden. And everyone since that day that has been born from the line of Adam, which is all of us, everyone that comes into this world with a sinful nature bent toward rebellion against not only God, but against all authorities that God has put in place around us.

So our default position as sinners is to rebel. Our default position as Westerners and Americans is to rebel and insist upon our rights. That's where we start in our thinking.

We want what is rightfully ours. Give me what is mine, we say. Don't violate my rights. Don't tread on me, we say.

[24 : 58] And yet, we see here that we are commanded first and foremost as a default position, not rebellion, not insisting upon our own rights.

As a default position, submission to those in authority. And not only when we agree with their instructions toward us, not only when we find ourselves wanting to do the things that they want us to do, not only when we have good authorities in place over us, but when we have unjust and unfair people in positions of authority over us.

Notice what he says, verse 18. Not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust. So what is it that would motivate us to submit in these kinds of conditions?

What is it that would motivate you to submit to the wishes of your boss when what he's asking you to do falls outside of your job description? So you might point to your contract and say, I don't have to do this.

That's the default. That's sort of where we naturally tend to go. I don't have to do this. That's not in my contract. Or when he asks you to do something that's going to go to really interrupt your schedule and really disrupt all the other things that you're doing.

[26 : 27] We would want to say, no, I'm doing this. I'm working on this. I've got this to do. I'm not going to do that. When they ask you to take on a load that's too much for you to bear.

Our natural response is to fight against that. Peter says, even if they're unkind, even if they're unjust, nevertheless we submit.

So we need powerful motivation to move beyond our sinful tendencies and to move beyond the cultural bias that we all have within us. So let me give you just a handful from this passage and hope and pray that these things will motivate you to obey Peter's command.

Number one is that submission and suffering in the midst of unjust treatment results in blessing and reward from God Himself.

See this in the passage in verse 19. It says, my translation, the ESV, says in verse 19, for this is a gracious thing when mindful of God would endure sorrows while suffering unjustly.

[27 : 35] And then at the end of verse 20, but if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. Now I want you to mark down those phrases, this is a gracious thing.

It occurs two times in this passage, both times in reference to suffering unjustly and submitting to an unjust master. It is a gracious thing.

Now that's a strange sort of phrase there. Literally what the text says is, this is grace. Well, what exactly does that mean?

And if you look in a number of translations, if you compare the King James Version with the NIV, the New American Standard, with the ESV, you'll notice that all of them translate that phrase, this is grace.

They all translate it a little bit differently. Some of them say, this obtains favor with God. Some of them say, this is thanksgiving or this is thankfulness.

[28 : 34] Because it's a very difficult phrase to render in English. There's in fact, I've only been able to find one other place that has very similar language using the same terminology.

and I think that it happens to be the very thing that Peter is alluding to here. It's found in Luke chapter 6 in the teachings of Jesus.

And I think that the apostle Peter has this teaching of his Lord in mind when he's giving us these instructions. So that if you turn there in Luke chapter 6, I want you to turn there so that you can see this.

This is really important. And it's in the midst of Jesus' instructions about loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you. So verse 27 of Luke 6, he says, But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.

Now I want to move down to verse 32 and begin reading there. He says, If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you?

[29 : 39] The word benefit is grace. It's the same word in 1 Peter. If you love those who love you, what grace is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what grace is that to you?

For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what? Literally the word is grace. What grace is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount.

But 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 is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

Be merciful, He says, even as your Father is merciful. Jesus' point is to say, if you love your enemies, if you pray for those who persecute you, if you not only do good to those who do good to you, but you do good to those who do evil to you, you will receive a kind of grace.

You will receive a benefit, a favor. He says later in the passage, you will receive a reward from God. So that I think the New International Version is not far off in its translation here in 1 Peter, when it says, when it translates this word as favor, submission to those in authority over us, even when they mistreat us, enduring suffering, in this world, earns God's blessing in a very special, unique way that otherwise we would not receive it.

[31 : 18] Sometimes we are a little bit skittish, a little afraid to talk of receiving rewards from God because we know that salvation is a free gift.

You cannot earn it. And that's absolutely true. And yet, over and over and over, the Scriptures speak to believers who've already been saved by grace as a free gift, receiving blessings from God, receiving rewards from Him.

So I think what Peter is saying here is that this kind of endurance in the midst of unjust treatment secures from God His favor and blessing.

And that is a favor and blessing that we may experience in this life, but I'm inclined to think most of the time we will not. Most of the time it is wrapped up in the inheritance that Peter speaks of being ours in chapter 1.

That we receive through Christ because of His resurrection power, we receive, verse 4, an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. And the reward, the primary reception of the reward that Peter promises will be a reward that I believe we receive in the new heavens and new earth so that all of our endurance now, all that are unjust suffering now, if we bear it up, trusting in God, fearing God, not insisting upon our own rights, but rather laying down our lives for the cause of the gospel.

[32 : 51] If we can do that, if we can endure even the smallest indignities in the workplace, if we can endure that with joy in Christ, the blessing of God, God's favor rests upon us.

And we have stored up for us a great treasury of blessings in the life to come. That's your first motive.

Never fix your eyes upon the rewards that you will receive immediately because there is a temporary satisfaction that you might have if you tell your boss off.

If you print out your contract and you slam it on his desk and you show him what your duties are, there's a temporary satisfaction and a welling up within you that you can have. And if you're focused upon immediate gratification, you'll insist on your rights, you'll disobey the word of God, and you'll forfeit that future blessing and future favor.

So don't fix your eyes on the now. Fix them on the future. So that's the first motivation that I want you to see here. Secondly, move down in the text a little bit further where he says in verse 21, Now there are massive truths contained within that small sentence there.

[34 : 26] First off, you can see that you have been called to suffer for to this. To what? To suffering. To enduring unjust treatment. To this you have been called.

Do not view the suffering and pain in your life as happenstance, as things that merely happen to you that God can overcome with His power.

Do not view them that way. View them as God's calling upon your life. In fact, view the sufferings that come into your life as a part of God's sovereign will for you.

Turn over to chapter 4, verse 19. Peter says, Therefore, that those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good.

It is God's will that we suffer. It is His will. It is His calling upon our lives as followers of Christ.

[35 : 30] It is His will. God is not, I've said this before, God is not a cosmic janitor who comes along behind the messes that are outside of His control and just sort of sweeps them up and makes things look better after the fact.

That's not His role. He's a sovereign king who orders even the suffering in your life for a reason. And the mess that's there is there because He has a plan for it.

It's there because He has a plan. Approach your suffering understanding that it is your it is your calling to endure suffering.

It is the lot of all those who are faithful to Jesus. Jesus said, if they persecuted me they will persecute you. And that's the foundation of this after all because one of the major motives that we have for enduring suffering is in fact the example of Christ.

We are called to imitate Christ in His suffering. Look what the verse says. For to this you have been called because Christ also suffered for you leaving you leaving you an example so that when we

bear up under suffering as Peter says here and when we endure through unjust treatment so that we can imitate Christ then Christ is put on display for those around you.

[37 : 07] You're putting on a show of what Christ is like. Jesus says that if you want to be my disciple deny yourself take up your cross that is suffer and follow me.

That's the call of the Christian life. Follow me but follow me in suffering. And when we do that when we endure joyfully through suffering fixing our eyes and our hope upon the future favor and reward of God then Christ is represented before the world in our lives.

What would you answer people when they ask you how are you able to endure the mistreatment that you endure? How are you doing it? You say Christ suffered for me and I follow His example. Which leads me to the final motivation that I want to give you because you follow that up by saying by the way let me tell you about the Christ who has suffered in our place.

The final motivation is that suffering joyfully and with full trust in God even in the midst of unjust treatment provides us with opportunities to put not only the attitude and the spirit of Christ on display but to put the gospel itself on display before people.

[38 : 45] Remember the broader context in which all these instructions about the Christian life are coming from Peter. Chapter 2 verse 9 He says you are a chosen race a royal priesthood a holy nation a people for his own possession why?

So that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. In the way that we respond to suffering we choose whether or not we are going to put the gospel on display for people to display the excellencies of him who called us and saved us will we do that or will we complain and whine about the suffering that comes into our lives?

If you see suffering as merely an inconvenience or a trampling of your own personal rights that you must insist upon then Christ will never be displayed the gospel will never be proclaimed in the midst of your suffering but if you endure joyfully that doesn't mean without tears but if you endure joyfully if you endure with a future hope rather than an insistence upon present justice then you proclaim the excellencies of him you called you out of darkness out of a life based upon self-centeredness and my own rights and into his his marvelous gospel light will you view suffering as an inconvenience as a thing to be pushed aside and overcome and complained about or will you view suffering as God's call upon your life and your opportunity to display the glory of Jesus and the beauty of the gospel to the world around you as it watches you

I don't know let's pray not one of us in here who will go through our lives without suffering there is not one of us in here who will go through our whole lives without having someone mistreat us even someone in authority over us and my prayer father is that you would sanctify us and enable us to be a people who proclaim the excellencies of Christ through and because of the sufferings that you call us to that we would not be a people constantly frustrated a people constantly angry a people constantly insisting upon our own rights but we would be a people who lay down our lives so that others might see

Christ it's in Jesus name that I ask these things Amen Amen