

“When My Spouse Doesn’t Believe”

Husband/Wife Relationship

1 Peter 3:1-7

December 17, 2006

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Susan sat in church and heard the testimony.

She had heard this kind of testimony before and, just as then, so now it made her wilt inside.

Justine Walden was telling about how her husband had become a Christian.

Justine committed her life to Christ several weeks earlier and now her husband was responding to Jesus’ love and Lordship.

As Susan heard it she was of course happy for **them**, but what about **her** husband?

“I’ve been praying for my him for 15 years. Why hasn’t he become a Christian?”

Though she felt alone in this, she wasn’t.

Many women and men struggle, living with spouses who don’t believe. (Anonymous in “The Christian Life” May 1978)

Susan’s husband wasn’t a bad man but his **lack** of faith in Jesus and her faith **in Jesus** put strains on their relationship.

Not only did that difference sometimes make for difficult situations but she also loved her husband and desired so much for him to have the relationship with Jesus she had.

The Apostle Peter wrote to the churches of Asia Minor to help them live in a culture and among people who did not believe as they now did AND who even made it very hard for those who did believe.

Peter wrote, 1 Peter 2:11-12 “Dear friends...Live such good lives among (unbelievers) that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

To understand what “living such good lives” means, Peter goes on to give three specific illustrations.

And in all three he gives the same basic instruction: submit.

1 Peter 2:13ff “Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men...”

1 Peter 2:18ff “Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect...”

1 Peter 3:1ff “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands...”

Please stand in honor of God’s Word and listen now to the way God says it through the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2:13-3:7.

^{1PE 2:13} Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority,¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.¹⁶ Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, and honor the king.

^{1PE 2:18} Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.¹⁹ For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.²⁰ But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

^{1PE 2:22} "He committed no sin,

and no deceit was found in his mouth."

^{1PE 2:23} When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

^{1PE 3:1} Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, ² when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. ³ Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. ⁴ Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. ⁵ For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, ⁶ like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

^{1PE 3:7} Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Prayer

It is the last illustration, of wives and husbands, to which we come today in our on-going study of 1 Peter.

Before looking at this more closely, I want you to notice that in all three illustrations,

Christians responding to governing authorities,
 Christians responding to masters,
 and Christian wives responding to their husbands,
the apostle doesn't confine himself to the specific situation, but in all three cases moves beyond it.

In this illustration that begins with wifely submission to an unbelieving husband, the apostle ends writing more broadly about the marriage relationship regardless of whether only one is a Christian or both are Christians.

To the wives he writes not only that they should be submissive to their husbands but also he goes on to say:

1 Peter 3:3-6 “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. ⁴ Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. ⁵ For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, ⁶ like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

And to the husbands he adds:

1 Peter 3:7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

My point is that while the specific situation Peter begins with is a Christian wife living with a non-Christian husband, Peter's instruction goes beyond that specific situation.

It seems to me that the principle applies to any Christian's relationship to unbelievers – especially unbelievers to whom they are closely related.

But Peter goes even further than that and addresses the issue of how husbands and wives are to treat each other, even if both are Christians.

So while the immediate application is for those wives who are in the hard situation of being married to an unbeliever, the instruction is applicable in all.

Now back to the immediate situation, which Peter is addressing:

1 Peter 3:1 “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands...”

What you are going to hear in the next few minutes runs counter to the typical egalitarian interpretation of the husband/wife relationship.

And I know this is very controversial in our culture.

As the word suggests, egalitarian teaching of the marriage relationship seeks to make husband and wife equal in all respects.

That has a nice sound to it but I think it ignores both the obvious differences of men and women and the God-ordained differences between husbands and wives.

Governors and citizens are certainly equal in personal worth but have different roles in the relationship.

Employers and employees and parents and children are equal in person but have different roles in the relationship.

Likewise, husbands and wives are equal in every way as to personal value and significance but God has designed men and women to complement each other in the marriage relationship.

In other words there is full equality but within real differences.

I'm convinced that the major reason why this is such a sensitive subject is because for centuries men have abused their God-given role and what was to have been completion became oppression; what was to have been a harmony of roles became "bullyism" and subjugation.

But back to the text; as much as the egalitarian culture around expects me to "dumb down" the word "submit," I cannot find biblical authority for doing so.

The word submit always implies a relationship of subordination. I didn't say inferiority but I did say subordination.

We have no difficulty saying the citizen is subordinate to the governor and that the employee is subordinate to the employer and so when the same word is used in the same context to describe the wife's relationship to her husband we should expect it to mean the same thing.

Peter says I want wives to submit to their husbands.

Something inside me tightens up when I say that because I know full well how some wives have been horribly abused by

husbands verbally bludgeoning their wives into submission and even using the Bible as the blunt instrument to do so.

But as we have noted so many times before, God never instructs husbands to make their wives submit but always he commands wives to submit.

It is not the action a husband forces but it is the position a wife willingly takes; she places herself under his authority.

Peter doesn't address it here, but the husband's authority is not unlimited or unquestionable.

The wife is not commanded by God to do whatever a husband asks when his requests or demands are contrary to the expressed will of God.

I reject some popular teaching that the wife is under the "covering" of her husband and thus must obey him no matter what he asks, believing that the husband will have to answer for her actions.

Peter sees women as responsible moral agents who must sometimes place obedience to God over obedience to their husbands.

And yes deciding that often puts a wife in the place of having to make decisions on very subjective bases.

But here's the point: her disposition, her propensity, her tendency is to yield to her husband's authority.

It's conjecture but I can imagine that when some women became Christians in that day they rather quickly saw the differences between the ways their husbands were and what God calls husbands to be.

As the Apostle Paul noted, some of those Christian women were tempted to divorce their non-Christian husbands.

It is possible that the husbands were jealous of their wives' newfound relationships in the church or they were angry about their wives' reluctance to do the same things they both used to do.

It is possible that the wives began to think now that they are free in Christ they don't need to put up with that nonsense.

Peter says wait! Even if your wives are married to non-Christian husbands, be submissive to them.

As much as is possible place yourselves under their authority.

He goes on to tell them the benefit that may accrue to such submission:

1 Peter 3:1ff “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands **so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words...**”

Peter says that **being** a godly woman will be the most persuasive way to win your husband over to Christ.

In fact he contrasts acting with speaking – “they may be won over without words...”

Most of us have learned that in the closest relationships words are usually the **least** effective way of communicating our faith.

It is not that we never say anything about Christ, but that we know that our lives, and especially the way we treat them, will be more persuasive than anything we can say.

“The author...expects evangelistic success from Christian life lived in the power of the Word and representing its reality...in the knowledge that **one’s life is a form of proclamation**, which can affirm or deny the authenticity of the gospel.” (Wolfgang Schrage in McKnight, 187)

Through the years I have watched that life in many women and men in this church who are married to unbelieving spouses.

They don’t continually quote Bible verses; they live a changed and changing life.

Or as Peter said it, “They may be won over without words **by the behavior of their wives when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.**”

What **is it** that Peter wants even the unbelieving husband to **see** in his wife?

He wants him to see the **purity** and **reverence** of her life.

The purity is her faithfulness to him, her allegiance to him.

She willingly defers to him (again, as much as possible within the bounds of her fear of God).

The reverence is precisely that – her fear of God.

The word reverence means “godly, reverent fear.”

She is specifically told 1 Peter 3:6 “do not give way to fear.”

She doesn’t fear her husband, she fears God.

Or as Peter said it in 1 Peter 1:17 “Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.

The husband sees that his wife’s love, her goodness, and her faithfulness to him are not threatened by her relationship with God but are in fact as a result of it.

It is **because** she fears God and submits to God’s authority that she **dares to submit** to her husband’s authority.

It seems to me that it is at this point in the text that Peter broadens beyond the specific example of a Christian wife’s relationship to an unbelieving husband.

He takes the opportunity to speak further to what a wife’s submission and a wife’s godly living look like.

1 Peter 3:3-6 “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes.

⁴ Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. ⁵ For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, ⁶ like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

Peter is either a very foolish man or he is truly inspired to take on the issue of women's fashion.

He is not arguing for a slovenly or dowdy appearance but he is arguing against the motivations that have, for centuries, been behind excessive fashion.

Some aspects of our culture have for years reduced women and more recently even men to mere sex objects.

Clothing, body size and shape, jewelry (including rings and tattoos), and much else are the new measures of value.

People are "sexy" or "hot."

Women especially seem to have often internalized or owned as their responsibility to play to men's tendency to view them as sexual objects or as expressions of a man's wealth or virility – "trophy wives". (Peter Davids, 117)

It expresses itself sometimes in how women dress to attract men or to compete with other women.

Peter is calling them to be modest not seductive; attractive but not provocative.

But is not only the sexual motivation behind some fashion to which Peter objects but also the sheer extravagance and waste.

It doesn't seem to matter whether a person is wealthy or not – they are often driven by the same value: that personal worth is somehow measured by appearances.

I read this past week that Laura Bush attended an official function recently in a \$8500 Oscar de la Renta gown. Why?

A man wears a \$3000 suit? Why?

Or he drives a car that costs \$75,000? Why?

Because we've bought into the idea that our value is measured by our appearance.

But Peter says no. The beauty of a godly wife is measured not by externals but by 1 Peter 3:4 “the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.”

It takes more and more makeup to cover the fading beauty of age.
But the beauty of the gentle and quiet spirit of the inner person is unfading.

I believe Peter is here **still** describing what a wife’s submission looks like.

1 Peter 3:5-6 “For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands.’

Now back to the preceding verse: a godly wife’s submission is gentle and quiet.

This **gentleness** is humility, kindness, and consideration of others.

It is an amiable friendliness rather than a brusqueness and bad temper.

It is a gentleness that doesn’t insist on its rights.
It’s not pushy or aggressive.

This **quiet** is calm and peaceful.

It is not restless, insubordinate or pugnacious.

If you are tempted to think that this weak, passive, and too easily abused, consider what the text says, 1 Peter 3:5 “this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful.”

Yes, they submitted to their husbands **not** because they most of all trusted their husbands, **but because** they most of all trusted God.

And Peter says that what is humble, quiet and self-effacing to us is precious, even lavish, in God’s eyes. (1 Peter 3:4 “of great worth in God’s sight.”)

It puts the question squarely before us: who do we trust most, the culture or God.

The culture says don't you dare take a submissive role in marriage.

But God says, do.

Who do you trust?

Before Peter leaves the subject, he turns his attention to husbands.

Of the three illustrations he uses in the larger context:

Governors and citizens,

Masters and slaves,

Husbands and wives,

this is the only one where he turns the tables and speaks of the other person's role.

I can't know this with certainty but it seems likely that Peter knows sinful male human nature well enough to realize that husbands might take advantage of their wives if Peter isn't very explicit about the husband's role as well.

Husbands are nowhere in the Bible instructed to submit to their wives.

They are called to a complementary role; they are to lead.

But here Peter doesn't address that role.

Instead he goes immediately to the way a husband is to respond to his wife submission.

1 Peter 3:7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

When he writes, "be **considerate** as you live with your wives" he doesn't simply mean be a considerate kind of person.

The literal translation is "live with your wife according to knowledge."

I'm convinced that Peter is saying there are at least two things you must know and bear in mind as you live with your wife.

First of all "treat them with respect as the weaker partner."

This word "weaker" could simply mean physically weaker which is generally true and would mean don't ever bully them.

No husband should ever physically intimidate his wife.

But I think this word "weaker" should also be understood as Susan Foh says, "When a woman marries she voluntarily accepts a position where she submits herself to her husband. Such a position makes her vulnerable, open to exploitation. Husbands are commanded to never take advantage of that." (*Women and the Word of God*, 133)

Think about it husbands. This woman has voluntarily submitted herself to you.

How do you respond to such love? Abuse it or guard it?

The second command to husbands is to "treat (their wives) with respect... as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life."

Never forget that your wife is

- Predestined by the same eternal purpose of God.
- Ransomed by the same blood of Jesus.
- Living by the same grace.
- Called to the same purpose and significance in life – servants of the most high God.

It is not that husbands get to make all the big decisions of life and women just follow.

The late, J. Allen Peterson said some men act like they are this big ship sailing full-steam ahead on the sea of life and their wives are like little dinghies paddling like crazy to keep up.

But as "heirs with you of the gracious gift of life" they have likewise been created for a purpose, redeemed to be remade into the image of Christ, and with gifts of the Spirit to be used for the people of God.

And treating her **with respect** means to value her, to honor her, to esteem her, and to give proper recognition due her for the position she holds in life.

- It means to recognize that her significance before the Lord is as great as yours.
- It is to recognize that her significance in life is as great as yours.
- It is to recognize her gifts and differences are of equal value.

And just as Peter said that a wife's lifestyle could have a profound impact on her husband, so he says a man's relationship with his wife can have profound consequences.

Specifically he says, "so that nothing will hinder your prayers."
The Psalmist said it this way in Psalm 66:18 (NASB) "If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear."

It is as important as that!

There is so much more that could be said, but hear it again from God's own Word:

1 Peter 3:1-7 "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, ² when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. ³ Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. ⁴ Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. ⁵ For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, ⁶ like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

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