

First Peter: In the Same Way

1 Peter 3:1-12

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We continue this morning in 1 Peter, with chapter 3 verses 1-7. We will make two points. Wives and Husbands in verses 1-7. And all of you in vv. 8-12.

I. Wives and Husbands

First, then, wives and husbands. And here Peter begins with the wives. Wives, likewise, or IN THE SAME WAY. In the same way, that Christ suffered, in the same way, that household servants must bear up under unreasonable masters, wives are told submit themselves to their own husbands.

The first thing to note about the text (and we made this point about household servants) is that Peter speaks directly to the wives. This is a revolutionary act. The ancient world had collections of ethical teaching, duties between people in differing stations in life, much like our passage. But in those household codes, as they were called, the person the culture viewed as inferior – the wife, the slave, the child – was not significant. Masters, husbands, fathers, they were addressed – they were the ones who really mattered.

But the NT not only addresses what was considered the inferior party but addresses them first. Here it's wives, then husbands. This is acknowledging, fronting, the personhood, the significance, the moral agency of the wife. Wives, in the same way, after the model of Christ, submit yourself to your own husbands. To submit here means, to place oneself under, to defer, to honor, to show respect, and it is done freely -- submit yourself. And it is not the same as obey. Children are told to obey; wives are told to place themselves in this posture freely.

Now, it appears that many of these women were converts, having unbelieving husbands. They are to submit, the text says, so that, if any of their husbands do not obey the word (gospel), they may be won over, without words, by the behavior of their wives.

So why are wives to place themselves in a position of deference here? Why? Peter gives one reason: Their submission will advance the gospel with your

unbelieving husbands. A gospel which in fact does and shall alter the conception of submission. So, witness – as in the whole of this section of the book – witness to unbelievers is the concern.

One might ask: if husbands had such total, dominant control of wives in this world, why would Peter even need to say this? I mean, who wouldn't believe this? Well, we do know that the way women were treated in the church, caused them to flock to it in great numbers.

Here, and nowhere else, women were treated as sisters, as equals in Christ, as part of a community in which the distinction between male or female, slave and free, Jew and Greek, was broken down, they were treated as priests and kings with full sanctuary access.... As having all the rights of "sons of God" (you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus), as being given the gift of prophecy to speak the Word of God....and so they flocked to Christ, and his church as a place of deep liberation.

Nevertheless, they were still to submit, even to unbelieving husbands. Now this submission – it goes without saying, is never absolute. And it NEVER, EVER justifies remaining in a violent or abusive situation. And just how relative this submission is, is something which is easily overlooked here. And it's this: in the Roman World, the wife would most likely, without question, adopt the husband's religion – as would the whole household. And that is not happening here. In fact, it's because that is not happening, that Peter must address the situation.

So, we have what appears to be a radical disagreement at the heart of (some) these marriages. We might say the wife is not, indeed, cannot submit, on what is, perhaps, most important to the husband. Since submission can never entail disobedience to God. Wives freely place themselves under, to win, to convert their husbands. Even without a word. Which doesn't mean they don't speak; it just means their example will be prominent. Augustine tells God a lovely story (Confessions) about his mother Monica. Speaking to the Lord he says:

She served her husband.....and did all she could to win him to you, speaking to him of you BY HER CONDUCT, by which you made her beautiful. Finally, when her husband was at the end of her earthly span, she gained him for you.

One is reminded of Francis of Assisi's quip – which can be easily misused, but which is apt here – preach the gospel to everyone. If necessary, use words.

The husband, verse 2 says, will see the purity and reverence (respectful and pure conduct) of their wives. These are virtues all of us are called to. In chapter 1 Peter said we are to be holy as God is holy (that's purity), and we are to conduct ourselves in fear during our time of exile (that's reverence).

Then Peter speaks of the wife's beauty. We are all called to live beautiful lives in the world. And here he's contrasting, not prohibiting. The contrast is between outer beauty – the cultural styles of Roman High-Society and interior beauty. What he calls the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in God's sight.

Again, these are not uniquely female virtues. They are Christian virtues. Jesus was meek and gentle of heart. Jesus did not lift his voice or cry aloud. Jesus was silent, quiet, in the face of harsh mistreatment. Gentleness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit for all. Peter will call all, men and women, to defend our hope, with gentleness and respect later in this chapter. All Christians seek to live quiet, peaceable lives. This is interior beauty of the Word made flesh in a life. Which wins, without a word, those who are disobedient to the word.

Finally, in vv. 4-6, the wife is given the example of holy women in the past, who hoped in God and adorned themselves with this beauty. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, like Sarah did to Abraham. She obeyed Abraham and called him lord. Which here, is a term of respect, similar to mister or sir. Sarah overcame fears and doubts (perhaps even about her husband), about the promise of God, and lived in subjection to Abraham. The Genesis narrative reveals Sarah as one with strong personal agency and great reciprocity with Abraham. Yet, she was freely in submission to him. These women to whom Peter writes, are her daughters: IF they do what is right and do not give way to fear. These wives are called, not to cowering fear, but to courage. Subjection here is a form of strength.

This is simply another example – tailored to wives - of the general rule of this passage. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Now to husbands. And here the husbands in view ARE Christians – otherwise Peter would not be addressing them. Verse 7: Husbands, IN THE SAME WAY. Notice: Verse 1: Wives, in the same way. Verse 7, husbands, in the same way. What way? Hopefully, we know by now. The way of Christ. The way of self-giving service, of self-emptying, or laying aside of one's rights, of placing others above oneself. Likewise, Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel.

So, as we are to honor all men. And to honor the emperor, so husbands are to honor their wives. To impose this kind of duty on a husband is, again, unique/rare in the ancient codes, for the husband had virtually absolute authority over the wife. But here honor must be shown. This is not a concession. This is a response to the objective bearing of the image of God. Slaves, wives, and now husbands, have all been called to show honor/respect in this passage. Honor is shown by the husband, to the weaker vessel. This simply means that, in general, women

are not as strong as men. It is not a statement of emotional vulnerability or anything like that.

We all have the treasure of the gospel in jars of clay, and we all seek the unfading inward beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. But here, due to a disparity in strength, Peter is protecting the woman from abuse – and demanding considerate honor from the husband. And there is an even deeper reason for this honor. The wife is an heir “with you of the grace of life.” Inheritance (being an heir) here is eschatological and spiritual. Peter has already said: you are born into an inheritance, kept in heaven for you. You have been given the gracious gift of life, eternal, eschatological life.

And so, honor your wife, because she is an heir with you in Christ, an heir of the coming imperishable, unfading, undefiled inheritance. And this way of living, is so that nothing will hinder your prayers. Marital harmony and love enables prayer. Paul says the same thing in 1 Cor. 7 – a text which teaches a mutual authority between husband and wife (over each other’s bodies) which can be set aside for the sake of prayer.

II. All of you

Peter is wrapping up this train of thought on submission in relationships which goes back to chapter 2, verse 13. Finally, he says, all of you. And before this FINALLY, we saw that: The whole community – as a community of free people - is to be subject to human institutions – to the Emperor and governors. After the example of Christ, household servants are to be subject to masters, even unreasonable ones. Christian wives are to be subject for the gospel’s sake to unbelieving husbands. Husbands are called to honor their wives as heirs of the grace of life. And to make clear that this call to cruciformity is one from which no one is exempt, Peter starts with: Finally, all of you. All of you. Here we will make three subpoints (under the second main point). Virtue in verse 8. Blessing in v.9 and Peace in verses 10-12.

Virtue

First, then, virtue. There are, in v.8, five qualities, five virtues, or fruits of the Spirit, listed. There is a kind of pattern to them. The first and the fifth have to do with the intellect, the second and the fourth have to do with the emotions, and the middle one, love, is the summit which binds them all together. We will look at them in accord with this pattern: 1 and 5, 2 and 4, and then 3.

With that, the first one is like-minded or unity of mind. We have the same heritage, we have the same Lord, the same faith, the same baptism, the same Spirit, the same hope, the same God and Father of all. Like-mindedness, then, is not a fiction. An invention. Its an ethos rooted in what we share in Christ. It is

coupled here with being of a humble mind. Humility is the key virtue if there is to be like-mindedness. It is the lifeblood of unity. Yet, we do not esteem it as we should. And the ancient world despised humility.

As one scholar puts it: In the highly competitive and stratified world of Greco-Roman antiquity, only those of degraded social status were “humble,” and humility was regarded as a sign of weakness and shame, an inability to defend one’s honor. Thus, the high value placed on it by Christians is all the more remarkable.

The second couplet is be sympathetic and be compassionate (have a tender heart). The two are virtually identical. Sympathetic means to feel with, and compassionate means for suffer with. In both cases we are talking about the moral capacity to enter into the other’s suffering or, even, harder perhaps, to get inside the others’ point of view. All of these are bound together by the middle virtue – love one another. This is Philadelphia, which we’ve seen earlier. Love of those born into the new family.

Blessing

The second subpoint is blessing. Verse 9: Do not repay evil for evil or insult for insult. This brings us into the realm of speech where so much of this wickedness takes root in the church. But Jesus was reviled! Threatened! There was an array of hateful speech directed at him to which he refused to respond in kind. AND YET, we are not simply to refrain, to hold our tongues, we are to positively bless. And here it’s clear that the one being blessed is an enemy. Have you been blessing your political enemies? Or just continually expressing your contempt? Peter’s Master taught him - in a world where hating enemies was expected, even noble-- But I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.

And now Peter says, to us who are on the receiving end of insult and abuse: On the contrary: repay evil with blessing. It means to speak well over, to invoke God’s favor upon. And anyone can do it with friends. Doing it with enemies is the summons of the gospel. We are free people. And that means we are free from having to defend everything all the time. Free from vindictiveness, and free to BLESS, to pour God’s goodness, his benediction, on those who most decidedly do NOT deserve it.

So, this repaying evil with blessing, this is done, the text says because it is our calling. After all, this is what, in God’s astonishing mercy, has lavished to us in the gospel! Grace is not unmerited favor, it is demerited favor, it is favor where wrath has been earned. Our salvation is God refusing to retaliate, and instead, blessing. Thus, we embrace this calling, the text says, so that we may inherit/obtain a blessing. This is the way to our inheritance, reserved in heaven for us.

Peace

That brings us to our third subpoint, peace. Here Peter quotes from Psalm 34 at length. Whoever would love life and see good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Here again – we are in the realm of the life and death power, the restless evil of the tongue. And this is a summons to pure, truthful speech. Gracious speech which edifies and blesses. Speech which gives grace to the hearers.

We must turn from evil and do good. We must, the text continues, seek peace and pursue it. We do everything in our power to maintain, to establish peace, because it is an inestimable good. We seek the peace of the church. We seek the peace of the city where we live as exiles. We pursue what makes for peace. For we know, v.12 says: that the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their prayer.

But, the text concludes, the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. God's eyes are on us, his ears are attentive to our cries, and his face is set against evil. This moral order, upheld and enforced by God himself, though often hidden and delayed from us. This divine justice is the reason we are freed from self-administered justice. This certain vindication liberates us from vindictiveness.

So, finally, ALL OF YOU: in imitation of the suffering and now vindicated Christ: Clothe ourselves in the five virtues in v.8, and the inter-personal peacemaking, the turning of the other cheek, of v.9. Let us speak and seek the peace of the gospel. For to this life of blessing you were called, that you might inherit the everlasting blessing, secured for us by the unjust suffering of the Son of God, the One who entrusted himself to him who judges justly. Amen.

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