



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Wives, Be Submissive

First Peter 3:1-7

Our text for today from First Peter 3:1-7. You may remember that in chapter 2 Peter told his readers to accept the authority of the emperor and governors. He told slaves to submit to their masters. Peter was not legitimizing the horrors the Emperor Nero, or approving the institution of slavery, but Peter's advice to Christians is to live such good lives among the pagans that they will see your good works and give glory to God.

First Peter 3 begins with these words:

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, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. 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. 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, 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.

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.

At a Presbytery meeting back during the days before the Presbyterian Church ordained women, a certain minister offered thanks for the wives who

had remained home to help keep affairs in order. In urging a resolution, he said, “While I am here drinking deeply from the wells of wisdom and spirituality of my elder colleagues, I am bound to remember that my dear wife remains at our little church bravely carrying on with the deacons.”

Yes, preachers have a way of putting their foot in their mouth. Knowing the fine line that I tread, it is with great fear that I tackle today’s text, hoping I can keep my feet out of my mouth and my life out of trouble. I am treading on very thin ice today.

Over the past month I have been preaching a series of sermons on the letter we know as First Peter, and today we begin chapter three. There was the temptation to simply skip over the first seven verses. I thought to myself, “Steve, be smart, simply start with verse 8, and no one will notice, nor will they care as long as they have the opportunity to hear the word. However, in order to be true to the text, I am going to take on these verses that begin with what is for some fighting words: **“Likewise, you wives be submissive to your husbands.”**

I know Peter wrote this text, but many in our society have put all the blame on the Apostle Paul concerning the place of women at home, at work, and in the church. Paul has been called every name in the book: woman hater, male chauvinist, irrelevant, and other words that cannot be used in this context. As a matter of fact, Paul has taken the blame for most of the problems women face in our culture. People blame Paul for women who stay in abusive situations. It’s Paul’s fault every time a mother and child are battered by a father and the mother will not pack up and leave. It’s Paul’s fault that women are not paid as much as men for the same work. You name the problem related to gender and the New Testament writings of Paul are to blame.

Well, let’s take some of the heat off Paul and put it on Peter as well. Peter tells wives to be submissive. However, before we continue our condemnation of Peter and Paul, before we blame them for all the troubles in the world, maybe we ought to spend a little time looking at their context. If we will consider the culture in which they lived, you will find out that Peter

and Paul actually give us some jewels of truth that will help us not only in our marital relationships, but in others as well as we work to make Jesus Christ known in our world today.

The most important goal for both Peter and Paul was make the love of Jesus Christ known. They were impatient with anything that might stand in the way of this goal. They were driven to teach people the gospel, praying and hoping that salvation would be realized in the lives of those walking in darkness.

For this cause, both Peter and Paul were willing to give up all they had. They were willing to give up their dignity. They would give up their lives to make Christ known. Paul went so far as to say, **“I will gladly go to hell if my people could realize their salvation in Christ.”**

There is a story in the book of Acts where Peter and John were standing before Caiaphas, the same High Priest who sat over the Sanhedrin when Jesus was tried. All the officers were present. Peter knew they could do to him what they did to Jesus. However, thanks to the intervention of those who were sympathetic to Peter and John, they were not condemned to death, but simply told not to speak in the name of Jesus ever again. Peter, knowing he could not obey this command, spoke these bold words, **“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than God, you must be the judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”**

Likewise, with boldness, Paul wrote these words in First Corinthians, **“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win more . . . I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.”**

Do you get the point? Peter and Paul gave up their personal rights. They gave up their right to seek their own way to put all their energies into promoting the way of Jesus Christ and the salvation they knew in Christ. Both Peter and Paul gave everything they had, even their lives, for Jesus Christ.

You may have heard the story of the coach whose football team needed a pep talk between halves of the game. He stood on a bench, looked down upon his players and said, “Men, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” That is what Peter and Paul were about. They gave up personal rights; they gave up everything in order to keep the main thing the main thing.

As we get into today’s text, we must begin looking at the context of the early church in Asia Minor, for these were the Christians to whom Peter wrote.

It appears that in the ancient Roman world the gospel had a greater appeal to women than to men. Now I can understand this, for the gospel has always had a greater appeal to those who are oppressed. The gospel has a special power in the lives of those who have been told all their lives that they are nothing, and have nothing of significance to offer society other than to have children, cook and care for their husband’s needs.

Oppressed people long to know Jesus who lifts them up and gives them dignity. One part of Jesus’ ministry was to give women freedom and dignity. There was the woman at the well who was an outcast until she met Jesus. And, of course, we remember the woman caught in the act of adultery to whom Jesus said, “I do not condemn you, but go and sin no more.” It was because of Jesus that Paul wrote that “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or free, there is neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.” Yes, Paul wrote that.

The New Testament was written in a world dominated by men, and it is in the Bible where we find the seeds that eventually grew into the doctrine of the total inappropriateness of slavery, even if the Bible itself permitted and accommodated itself to such a practice in the ancient world. Likewise, the biblical notion of equality has given rise to the modern notion of the equality of all people, and particularly to the equality of women and men as people.

In the first century Greek world the gospel spread among women faster than it did among men. So an issue in the church Peter wrote to was: What was a women to do who came to faith in Jesus Christ, but her husband

remained pagan in his beliefs? So taking pen in hand, Peter wrote, **“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, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.”**

Remember the sermon from two weeks ago, and again last week. In the texts that were read, Peter exhorts Christians to submit to every authority, whether the king or the king’s governors. Part of the reason for Peter’s words concerned the appropriate response of Christians who were being slandered by the Emperor and others. It was said that Christians were atheistic, incestuous cannibals. In order to silence these foolish accusations, Peter told Christians to live in such a way that any verbal attack would prove to be unfounded and ridiculous.

In Peter’s world the king was Nero, and Nero persecuted Christians in horrible ways. He was the last person on earth any of us would respect. But as Peter wrote in 2:12, **“Live such godly 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.”**

People will not be come to know Jesus Christ through violent rebellion, nor by defensive words, or through government legislation, but people come to Christ through the witness of godly lives. Our good deeds will open people to hear the gospel. Therefore, honor the king. Peter used slaves as an example, telling them to respect and submit to their masters for one reason, not because slavery is right, but that slaves might win their masters to Jesus.

That is the main thing, not our rights, but helping others know the love of Jesus Christ.

A dear member of our church sent me her answers to the questions that were asked last week concerning an Associate Pastor. Remember those questions? One of her responses read: “I hope that Christ and our church will not be used to further any political or social agenda. I hope that we will love not only the abused and down-trodden, but also the abusers and those who

tread upon *us and* others, as Christ loved them. I have heard it said by people in this church, 'You can't change anyone by hating them.' I agree, but if we allow God's love to flow through us, maybe hearts can be changed."

This wise member hit the nail on the head when it comes to communicating what Peter was writing about in chapters 2 and 3 of his letter. Our agenda as a church is to love all people in order to make the love of Jesus Christ known.

Peter was writing to wives who have unbelieving husbands. Submit to them so that without a word, but with beautiful living you may convince them of Christ's lordship.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter instructed wives of his day, and both husbands and wives in our culture, that the way to win your spouse to Christ, or anyone else, is not through secret manipulation or pouting, sulking, scheming, bargaining, nagging, preaching, coercing, forcing or humiliating. People who use these strategies are not trusting God and they are not successful.

You cannot make a husband or a wife or anyone else something they are not. Only God can change a person. I believe it was the late Ruth Graham who said, "It is my job to love Billy. It is God's job to make him good."

Now allow me to take a brief time out and mention that Peter was writing wives because their husbands were not Christians. He was not writing wives because their husbands were abusive. A problem in society throughout the ages is caused by angry men who intimidate, threaten, manipulate, and even batter their wives and children. Submission to this kind of non-Christian behavior is not only life threatening, it is not helpful in winning a man to the Lord. In these cases the church's job is to provide care for women so they can build another life away from the dangerous situation in which they find themselves.

Looking at verses three and four of our text, I know that many of us got up early this morning to get ready for church. And as I look out over this

congregation, I am pleased to see the modesty with which this congregation dresses for worship. But, think for a moment of those formal affairs. What do you do to make yourself beautiful or handsome?

Peter wrote in verses 3 and 4, **“Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. 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.”**

Scripture does not forbid the braiding of hair or wearing fine jewelry and clothes. But Scripture teaches that what makes a person beautiful or handsome is not what they wear, it's not the anti-wrinkle cream, not the fad diets, it's not the make-up, it's not the tie or the suit, but beauty comes from within.

I know that many women, especially younger women, spend much time and effort in an attempt to show men how gorgeous they are rather than how smart they are. Of course, the reason for this is that men see better than they think.

External beauty is fleeting. Internal beauty is eternal. The former is attractive to the world; the latter is pleasing to God. Peter described internal beauty as “a gentle and quiet spirit.”

Do you recognize the relationship between a gentle and quiet spirit with the character of Jesus. Remember Jesus saying in his invitation to come to him. He said, **“Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart.”** Without question, this is any woman or man's most powerful quality – it is the basis of true character. And such character comes from within – from the hidden person of the heart – because you know who you are and you know who you adore and serve, the Lord Jesus Christ. God values this kind of inner beauty as “imperishable” and “precious.”

In verse seven of our text, Peter turns his attention to the men. After all there were some Christian men in the congregation. **“Husbands, in the same**

way be considerate as you life 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.”

Ladies, I would venture to guess you received this text with mixed emotion. I mean if we were a little freer in our worship many of you may have said, “Amen,” to the first part of that verse, **“Husbands be considerate,”** but what is this about being the weaker partner? It is simply this. When my wife cannot open the pickle jar she hands it to me. I cannot always get it open, but there is one thing I am better at than my wife, and that is opening new pickle jars, simply because my hands are stronger.

There are many women pumping weights these days, but I bet that if we got 25 men on one team and 25 women on a second team for a tug-of-war, the men would win. Peter was talking about physical strength, and in the first century Rome that gave men the advantage to dominate their world. And what Peter was saying was out of step with his culture, for he was saying, “Men, I know you are stronger, but that does not give you any right to hit, batter or dominate, but you are to be considerate of your wife.” Imagine that, in a world where women had basically no rights, Peter told the men to be considerate of their wives.

We expect this in our culture, but in the ancient world this was a whole new way of thinking.

Well, all this is fine and good to hear, but remember the main thing in this passage. Peter, writing about a particular relationship, that is, the relationship between husbands and wives, Peter’s goal was that we live such good lives, gentle lives, loving lives, caring lives, considering others, in order to win them over to Jesus Christ as their Lord. As Jesus said, “Do unto others as you would have them to unto you,” all this points to one goal – the main thing. Christians live in the pagan world in such a way that others will want to know Jesus Christ. Amen.

