

FLOURISHING IN MARRIAGE

SERIES: FLOURISH: HOPE IN A STRANGE LAND



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1 Peter 3:1-7
Seventh Message
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1 Peter 3:1-7

First, I'd like to address the single people in our church. The message you're about to read, based on 1 Peter 3:1-7, is mostly about marriage.

I understand that some single people feel that marriage is held up in churches as the glorified state and therefore feel something along the lines of second-class. If you have gotten that impression from our church, please know that we do not believe such nonsense and that it is not our intent to communicate such nonsense. Our ambition is to encourage everyone to follow Jesus, whether or not marriage is involved.

As many of you know, I didn't get married until I was forty-two years old. Although I wanted to be married, never during all those years did I consider marriage to be the glorified state, nor was I led to believe it was the glorified state at the churches that I attended, even one that consisted almost entirely of married couples and families. Maybe I ended up at the right churches. I don't know.

At the age of thirty-six, I joined the pastoral staff at PBC, the first and only church that I have served as a pastor. For six years I served as a pastor here as a single man. Never once did any of the elders or pastors make me feel "less than."

Anyway, let's just say that I have a little experience with singleness. If you want to talk with a pastor about your experience as single person, my door is open. Also, you may want to read my message on the PBC website titled "What I Learned From Being Single All These Years": https://cdn.pbc.org/Main_Service/2000/04/12/last_hurrah_2.pdf. I delivered it to the young adults group I shepherded the Sunday before Karen and I were married.

Almost all the sermons that we preach at PBC are applicable to both single and married people. This one, however, is especially applicable to married people, although I'll have a word at the end for single people

who are interested in being married. The message is based on the next passage in the book we are currently studying, 1 Peter.

By the way, this needs to be said these days: biblically, marriage is between a man and a woman. Thus Peter instructs women who are married to men and men who are married to women.

Two contradictory ideas

Thanks to multiple marriages, divorces, cohabitation, stepfamilies, and various other couple combinations, the United States experiences "more turbulence in our family lives, more changes of partners and parents, than any other nation," according to Andrew Cherlin, Johns Hopkins University professor of public policy. The ever-changing definition of gender only makes things more chaotic.

Cherlin blames two contradictory cultural ideals. On one side is marriage itself, which still holds a sacred place in American life. On the other side is "a kind of individualism that emphasizes self-expression and personal growth." Sure, most of those who get married want to stay married "as long as you both shall live"—but in many cases only if it doesn't get in the way of their pursuit of happiness.¹

The Scriptures, including 1 Peter 3:1-7, see things a little differently. If we listen to the apostle Peter's words, and those of the apostle Paul, they will help us flourish as married couples.

Instructions for wives

1 Peter 3:1-2:

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, 2 when they see your respectful and pure conduct.

The word translated “likewise” serves to connect what Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:1-6 to what he has written previously, but in a loose way. Peter’s use of the word elsewhere indicates that a word such as “moreover” captures the meaning (see 1 Peter 3:7, 5:5).

The verb translated “be subject” (*hupotasso*) is used thirty-eight times in the New Testament. I looked up each of these references. In every other use similar to Peter’s context, including Peter’s other uses of the verb, some kind of subjection to authority is implied (1 Peter 2:13, 18; 3:22; 5:5).²

As a boy, Jesus was “submissive” (*hupotasso*) to his parents (Luke 2:51). Paul envisions the final day, when God the Son will be “subjected” (*hupotasso*) to God the Father (1 Corinthians 15:28). Clearly, Jesus, as God the Son, was neither inferior to his parents, nor is he inferior to God the Father. Jesus, though submissive to authority, always was and always will be God. Peter is not saying that women are inferior to men, especially inasmuch as he says in verse 7 that women are “heirs” of “the grace of life.” Biblically, men and women are equal before God.

Paul also instructs wives to be subject to their husbands. In fact, he does so in three of his letters: Ephesians, Colossians, and Titus. All told, two different apostles, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, instruct wives to be subject to their husbands six times in four letters addressed to eight different locales.

The following conclusions emerge:

—The English words “be subject” constitute a suitable translation for the Greek word *hupotasso*.

—The apostles expected the wives among their readers to be subject to their husbands

Decode and restructure

But what about today? Do the apostles’ words to wives apply today? Some commentators say no. Scot McKnight is one of them:

I believe times have changed, the culture has changed, and it is ours to relate the gospel to our modern world . . . Our culture has changed so dramatically that we have to think through this issue to discern how we are to apply such teachings to our world. To think that a one-to-one correspondence obtains for today would be a tragic (and completely unworkable) mistake . . . In other words, the

text must be understood in its own terms, decoded, and then restructured to speak to modern women. 3

I find no indication in the apostles’ letters that their instructions to wives and husbands came with an expiration date. What else about our culture has “changed so dramatically” since the first century? Many things, of course.

If the culture has changed so dramatically that we need to decode and restructure the apostles’ instructions to wives, shouldn’t we also decode and restructure their instructions to husbands? McKnight and some others whom I have read, however, do not suggest that applying Peter’s instructions to husbands to show “honor to the woman,” in a one-to-one correspondence, is tragic or even unacceptable.

Moreover, Peter in verse 5 cites Sarah, in her marriage to Abraham, as an example for wives to follow. Sarah lived almost two millennia before Peter. In two millennia, the culture no doubt had changed, at least somewhat. Yet Peter sees no need to decode and restructure Sarah’s marriage to Abraham in order to apply it to marriages in his day.

Furthermore, what are the criteria for decoding and restructuring so that we arrive at God’s instructions for today? It seems to me that the text is not so much being decoded and restructured to speak to modern women as it is being dismissed and discarded so that it doesn’t speak to anyone at all. One scholar suggests that the biblical instructions for wives to be subject to their husbands may now be “outmoded.”⁴ Don’t apply them. Don’t reapply them. Just skip right over them.

If we discard Peter’s instructions to wives, what else in his letter—or what else in the rest of the New Testament, for that matter—should we discard? What else is “outmoded”?

To be honest, if the Spirit, who breathed out this text through Peter, expects me to decode it, I don’t know how to do it. Moreover, Paul grounds his instructions to wives and husbands not in a cultural context but in a theological one: Christ’s relationship to the church (Ephesians 5:22-33).

I am inclined to take the apostles’ instructions at a face value. My conclusion: God wants believing wives today to be subject to their husbands. This, to me, is the most straightforward reading of the apostles’ words.

However, the apostles' instructions for wives to be subject to their husbands have been misunderstood and, almost unforgivably, hijacked, especially by weak men who have abused women, either emotionally or physically, in order to compensate for their weakness.

It should also be noted that the biblical instruction for wives to be subject to their husbands is addressed to wives. Peter does not instruct husbands to tell their wives to be subject to them.

What does it mean for wives to be subject to their husbands? We'll come back to that later, after we hear Peter's instructions to husbands.

Without a word

Peter instructs believing wives to be subject to their husbands even if their husbands are unbelievers. Some women are married to men who "do not obey the word"—that is, men who don't believe the gospel and even oppose it. Nevertheless, Peter holds out hope that these men "may be won" to Christ.

He says it's possible for women to participate in winning their husbands to Christ "without a word." This doesn't mean, of course, that women shouldn't speak to their husbands. The gospel is defined as "the word." Women need not use "a word"—that is, a word about the gospel.⁵ Of course, women should share the gospel with their unbelieving husbands, but at a certain point, if their husbands are disobedient to the word, wives have to stop preaching the gospel, start living the gospel, and trust their husbands to God. This is holy stuff.

Peter doesn't hold out hope that the right words will work; he holds out hope that the right conduct will work. The words translated "respectful" would be literally translated "in fear"—that is, fear of God. Peter holds out hope that unbelieving men will be won to Christ as they see their wives' courageous and loving conduct that emerges from their relationship with God. It may be suitable for wives to continue sharing the gospel in times and in ways; it's just that at a certain point with certain men, women's conduct, not their preaching, becomes more effective.

Presumably Peter's instructions also apply to believing men who are married to women who are disobedient to the word—and to anyone who is seeking to share the gospel with others.

Peter has a few more things to say about the conduct he's advocating for wives

The hidden person of the heart

1 Peter 3:3-4:

Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—4 but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.

More literally, Peter says, "Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry or the putting on of clothes . . ." The more literal translation helps us see that Peter is not prohibiting the braiding of hair or the wearing of jewelry per se. If he were, he would also be prohibiting the wearing of clothing—and I don't think we want that!⁶

Peter is advocating a certain "conduct"—a way of life—that doesn't focus on "external" appearance. Evidently, he doesn't expect husbands to be won to Christ by external appearance. Instead, Peter advocates a way of life that focuses on "the hidden person of the heart," where the Spirit nurtures a "gentle and quiet spirit."⁷

The words "gentle" and "quiet" convey qualities that the New Testament advocates for all believers, not just wives. "Gentleness" is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 6:1). Jesus described himself as "gentle" (Matthew 11:29). Peter says a few verses later that we should all be prepared to defend the gospel with "gentleness" (1 Peter 3:15). Paul wants us all to live "quietly" and to live a "quiet" life (1 Thessalonians 4:11, 1 Timothy 2:12).⁸

The words "gentle" and "quiet" convey inner strength coming from trust in the Lord. Gentle and quiet women and men don't need to manipulate. They don't need to coerce. They don't need to demand their rights. Gentle and quiet women and men trust the Lord to meet their needs. They can win people to Christ on the strength of their character, without a word. A gentle and quiet spirit is "imperishable," lasting forever, and "very precious" in God's sight, in contrast to jewelry and clothing.

The Lord told Samuel, "For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). True, of course. But

Peter also expects “the hidden person of the heart” to be seen by others in the way one lives her life: “when they *see* your respectful [fear-of-God] and pure conduct.”

Next, Peter looks to the past for inspiration.

The example of holy women

1 Peter 3:5-6:

For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, 6 as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

To inspire wives, Peter cites “the holy women who hoped in God.” The word “holy” means “set apart.” These women were set apart to God, not to their husbands. They also hoped in God, not their husbands.⁹

These holy women “used to adorn themselves,” so to speak, with their conduct, which originated in “the hidden person of the heart,” where a “gentle and quiet spirit” was cultivated. Contrary to the ESV translation, these holy women didn’t adorn themselves “by” submitting (the word translated “by” does not appear in Peter’s text; it is an interpretive addition). Yes, they submitted to their husbands, but their submission was not the way they adorned themselves but instead a manifestation of their gentle and quiet, trust-in-the-Lord spirit. Because they trusted in the Lord, they submitted to their husbands.

The example of Sarah

Peter singles out one of these holy women, Sarah, who was married to Abraham. She “obeyed Abraham, calling him lord.” Evidently she did not obey Abraham *by* calling him lord, especially inasmuch as there is no account in Genesis of Abraham instructing Sarah to call him lord.

The verb translated “obeyed” appears in a tense that often conveys a one-time action as opposed to an ongoing action. In the book of Genesis, Sarah is seen as obeying Abraham on three occasions. On the first two occasions, she should not have obeyed him, because he asked her to pose as his sister. Likewise, Abraham obeyed Sarah, though he shouldn’t have, when she told him to have sex with her servant Hagar: he “listened to,” or obeyed, the voice of Sarah (Genesis 16:2).

In Genesis 18:6, Abraham asked Sarah to prepare cakes for three visitors, who represented the Lord, while he ran off to make arrangements for the preparation of a calf. Evidently, she obeyed. Peter apparently has Sarah’s obedience in Genesis 18 in view, inasmuch as she later called Abraham “lord” when she overheard what the visitors had to say. She obeyed Abraham, preparing the cakes, while calling him lord—or, she obeyed Abraham, preparing the cakes, and then called him lord.

Her obedience in this case comes off as commendable, in contrast to her subsequent reaction to the visitors’ promise that she would have a son even though both she and Abraham were advanced in years. Her reaction is recorded in Genesis 18:12: “So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?’”

Peter is not saying that wives should always obey their husbands anymore than he is saying that husbands should always obey their wives. Sarah’s one-time obedience is simply part of the Genesis story that Peter is recalling. We can, however, do better than Abraham and Sarah in order to make sure our requests of each other are reasonable and certainly not contrary to the will of God. And if a spouse requests us to do something contrary to the will of God, we should deny the request.

What’s striking in the context of Genesis 18 is what Sarah doesn’t call Abraham. She uses an honorific title when something dismissive—something like “old man,” “geezer,” or “fogy”—could be described as being understandable. Even when she doesn’t believe her husband is capable of fulfilling the Lord’s promise, she still speaks of him respectfully. It’s important to speak of our spouses respectfully.

Peter obviously does not mean that women are literally the children of Sarah; he means that they are like her, doing what she did—in this case doing good and not giving in to fear. Sarah “did good,” and Peter wants everyone, women as well as men, to do good” (1 Peter 2:15, 2:20; 3:11, 13, 17; 4:19). Women (and men) who fear the Lord don’t need to be afraid of anything. Here, Peter extolls fearless women—women whose fear of the Lord makes them fearless, especially in the context of marriage.¹⁰

Only a picture

The most important thing wives and husbands can do for their marriages is to cultivate intimacy with the Lord, which takes place in “the hidden person of

the heart.” Granted, intimacy with the Lord is at times elusive, but it must be cultivated nonetheless, as if your life depended on it. Indeed, your spiritual life depends on it. Also, a Christ-centered marriage depends on each partner cultivating intimacy with the Lord. As you cultivate intimacy with the Lord and sense that he meets your deepest needs, he inspires you to love, albeit imperfectly, and he enables you to receive love, even imperfect love.

After all, our earthly romances are only a picture of our transcendent romance with God. God is romancing us every moment of our lives. He is especially romancing us through our desire for earthly romance, through our insatiable longing to know and be known, which represents our fierce yearning to find and lose ourselves in the embrace of God.

The unsatisfying parts of marriage remind us that no human can meet our deepest desires. Even the satisfying parts of marriage aren’t satisfying enough. Marriage, in both its satisfying and unsatisfying aspects, is meant to spark our romance with God.

What does Peter have to say to husbands?

Instructions for husbands

1 Peter 3:7:

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Peter instructs husbands to do two things: (1) live with their wives literally “according to knowledge” and (2) show their wives “honor.” (See footnote for a more literal translation and a structural analysis of the sentence.¹¹)

To live with a woman according to knowledge means to know her, not just on a superficial level but also on a deep level. It also means to appreciate that she is “the weaker vessel”—that is, weaker physically and therefore more vulnerable (2 Corinthians 4:7). Of course, some women are physically stronger than men. Even so, the strongest men are stronger than the strongest women, and women, simply by virtue of their physical makeup, are more vulnerable. Men, even the strongest men, are weak too, of course; it’s just that most women are weaker.

Peter wants husbands to honor their wives while being mindful that they are “heirs with you of the grace of life.” A believing woman will inherit the new creation and rule over it, along with other believing women and men. A man who is married to a believing woman is sleeping with an heiress. Indeed, she is deserving of honor.

Peter wants husbands to do these things so that their prayers “may not be hindered.” If husbands are not following Peter’s instructions and instead disrespecting their wives, they will have a hard time praying sincerely, either alone or with their wives, at least until they confess.

Intriguing instructions

In light of the apostles’ instructions to wives, I find their instructions to husbands intriguing. Both of them instruct women multiple times to be subject to their husbands, which implies that the husbands are in some sense leaders in the marriage. However, neither of them ever instructs husbands to lead their wives. We have already observed Peter’s instructions. What does Paul say to husbands?

— “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25).

— “Husbands should love their wives” (Ephesians 5:28).

— “[L]et each one of you love his wife as himself” (Ephesians 5:33).

— “Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them” (Colossians 3:19).

Peter and Paul show us what leadership looks like. Peter: Live with your wife in order to know her, while appreciating that she is physically more vulnerable, and honor her as one who will rule forever. Paul: Love your wife, love your wife, love your wife, and, uh, love your wife. How do you do that? You give yourself up for her. You sacrifice for her. If husbands are to give themselves up for their wives, then they should sublimate what they want to what their wives want.

Husbands: lead by loving, lead by sacrificing for your wife, and lead by honoring her.

Neither Peter nor Paul says or implies that men are better leaders than women. There is no indication that

the difference between their instructions to husbands and wives has anything to do with competence.

Many husbands have dominated, stifled, or abused their wives, some almost unforgivably in the name of the Scriptures. Personally, I have met, and counseled, more men who are more prone to passivity than domination—men who need to heed Peter and Paul’s instructions, come out of their caves, and move toward their wives in vulnerable, self-giving love. These men don’t so much misapply these New Testament texts as much as they fail to apply them. My own tendency is more toward passivity than domination.

In premarital counseling, I tell the prospective grooms not to concern themselves with leading their wives. Some who think that they’re supposed to be spiritual leaders are concerned that they aren’t spiritually mature enough. Don’t worry about that, I tell them. You can’t find a command in the New Testament for husbands to lead their wives. But you find multiple commands for husbands to love their wives. Don’t concern yourself with leading her; concern yourself with loving her.

I was convicted upon hearing that Jesse Barrett, the husband of Supreme Court justice nominee Amy Coney Barrett, has asked his wife every morning of their marriage what he can do for her that day (they have seven children, including one with Down’s Syndrome and two they adopted from Haiti, so there must be a lot to do). Even when she says nothing, he still finds ways to take things off her plate despite his busy law practice.

What does it mean to love your wife? This: Give yourself up for her. Sacrifice for her. Maybe what she fears, deep down, is that she’s not worth it. You can show her that she is. If you sacrifice for her, it will probably mean a lot to her.

Marriage today

What then do Peter’s words, if followed, look like in a marriage today? Scholar Karen Jobes comments:

While the foundation for Christian submission in marriage is deeply rooted in theology, the specific expressions of submission relate to the times in which we live. What counts as submission today may be quite different from what counted as submission in the first century, because social expectations differ over time and from place to place. But this does not mean that Peter’s instructions are no longer relevant to Christians

today since our society generally does not uphold the hierarchical marriage as it was practiced in the first century . . .

Peter wisely did not spell out in specific terms what it means for a Christian wife to submit to her husband or for a Christian husband to live considerately with his wife. The apostle laid down the principles and then left the details to be worked out between the spouses. The church today is right to uphold a biblical order within marriage that mirrors the relationship of Christ and his church, but it should also follow Peter’s wisdom and refrain from trying to specify what it must look like in every case.¹²

By the way, Jobes dedicates her commentary on 1 Peter to her husband Buzz, noting that he, “by his support for my work,” exemplifies Paul’s instructions for husbands to give themselves up for their wives. She speaks respectfully of him, the way Sarah spoke respectfully of Abraham.

If a husband and wife are putting the words of the apostles into practice, the man will love her and the woman will receive his love, even his imperfect love. If the husband loves his wife, being subject to one’s husband means receiving his love.

Wives: receive his love. Maybe what he fears, deep down, is that he doesn’t have what it takes. You can show him that he does. If you receive his love, it will probably mean a lot to him.

Sautéed tilapia

I do a fair bit of the cooking in our household. By the way, my wife Karen does all the finances. I do *some* of the cooking; she does *all* of the finances. I’m the son of an accountant, but somehow a facility with numbers escapes me. I still use my fingers to count.

My third date with Karen involved a hike in the Stanford hills. During the hike, I asked her a question that went something like this: “Hypothetically speaking, if you’re married, who do you envision taking the lead with the finances, your husband or you?” Her answer went something like this: “If my husband wanted to be involved, that would be fine, but I’d like to do it.” At that point, I had to resist the temptation to get down on one knee right then and there!

Anyway, Karen does a great job with our finances, but my culinary efforts are far from perfect. I circle

around three of four rudimentary recipes. I will sometimes apologetically announce to the family that dinner is ready, “such as it is.”

One of my recipes is sautéed tilapia, which requires me first to cover the fish with flour before putting it in the frying pan. One night a few years ago, when I put the finished product on the table, my family said it looked a little different. Indeed, it was sort of foaming. It tasted different too—kind of sweet. Turns out instead of reaching for the flour, I reached for the powdered sugar.

I’m trying to love my wife—and the rest of my family. I know I’m not doing it well. It’s not hard to cook reasonably well; you just need to do a little research and practice a little trial and error. I could do better. I know that. However, in twenty years of marriage, Karen has never complained about any of my sub-optimal offerings. In fact, she regularly thanks me. I love her—not very well, I think. Nevertheless, she receives my love, “such as it is.”

A word to single people

What do these verses have to say to single people who would like to be married?

First, look for someone who has a relationship with the Lord. Peter acknowledges that some women are married to unbelieving men, but he writes with hope that the men will come to faith. Neither men nor women should put themselves in a position where they have to try to win their spouses to Christ. They should marry people who have already been won. Second, look for someone is responsive to God’s word, including his word in 1 Peter 3:1-7.

It’s better to be single than to be married to someone who doesn’t know the Lord or isn’t responsive to his word.

Flourish

Husbands: Give yourselves up for your wife. Wives: Receive your husband’s love. Everyone: There’s more to marriage than these instructions, obviously, but if you begin with these instructions and return to them, you will be helped to flourish in marriage.

Endnotes

- 1 Gilbert Cruz, “The Marriage-Go-Round,” *Time* (May 4, 2009), 16.
- 2 Peter says that “angels, authorities, and powers” have been “subjected to” Christ” (1 Peter 3:22). He also instructs those who are younger to “be subject to the elders” (1 Peter 5:5).
- 3 Scot McKnight, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), 187-93.4.
- 4 Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1990), 393).
- 5 In 1 Peter 3:15, Peter uses the word “word” to convey a word about the gospel, though in that verse it is translated “reason.”
- 6 If the father in the Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son instructed his servants to put a ring on his son’s hand, then the Scriptures are not opposed to jewelry per se (Luke 15:22).
- 7 There is no word among Peter’s words that should be translated “beauty.”
- 8 See also Matthew 21:5 and 2 Thessalonians 3:12.
- 9 Peter instructs his readers to “set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). He also tells them that “your faith and hope are in God” (1 Peter 1:21).
- 10 Literally, the word “if” does not appear in this sentence: “And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.” Literally, the sentence reads, “And you are her children, doing good and not fearing anything that is frightening.”
- 11 More literally, the sentence reads: Husbands likewise /while dwelling with the your wives according to knowledge, / as with the weaker vessel, / while showing honor, / as they are heirs with you of the grace of life / so that your prayers may not be hindered.
- 12 Karen H. Jobes, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005) 211-12.