

Wives and Husbands

1 Peter 3:1–7

Today, it is my privilege to teach on wives and husbands as we continue through the book of 1 Peter. Contrary to what Steve said a couple of weeks ago, however, I did not ask for this assignment. Actually, I'm happy to address this issue, but it is a weighty topic. There is so much at stake in how these Scriptures are handled. I feel the weight of this. There is so much at stake in every marriage represented in this room.

I also know that just talking about marriage can stir up so many emotions - desires to be married; reminders of failed marriages; and, the pain of current unhappy marriages. Wherever you are at today in terms of marriage, let me encourage you to invite God to speak to you.

Today, we are looking at 1 Peter 3:1-7. As you turn there, let me remind you of the context. Back in 2:12, Peter commanded us to keep our conduct honorable so that people will see our good deeds and glorify God. Peter then talked about areas of life in which we are to do this. He says in 2:13 that we are to be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution. And so he has talked about how we are to relate to governing authorities (2:13-17) and how servants are to relate to their masters (2:18-25). Now, Peter turns his attention to wives and husbands.

In our text, there are six verses to wives and one to husbands. Most commentators believe that this is because as the Gospel was spreading more women were responding and that created a unique situation for women that Peter needed to address. But men, don't think that this means that we should only spend one-seventh of our time this morning talking about us. I want to try to spend as much time talking to husbands as to wives, which means that we will not be able to address every issue in Peter's instructions to wives.

Okay, so here are Peter's . . .

I. Instructions to Wives . . . of Unbelieving Husbands (v. 1-6)

¹ *Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands,*

This is the central command for all wives. Everything else that Peter will say in the following verses will be for wives who have unbelieving husbands. And so I want to focus on just this part of the verse for a few moments, but before I do let me give some thoughts about how people under this command.

Bible-believing Christians differ on whether the passages that teach that wives are to submit to their husbands still apply today. Some believe that these passages are rooted in cultural issues of the day. They believe that in Christ there no longer are these role distinctions of the husband as the leader and the wife stepping under his leadership. This would be what is called an egalitarian view of marriage. I know that this is how some of you understand these verses and I want you to know that I respect your position.

Others look at these same passages and believe that these instructions do still apply. This is my understanding and this is Faith's understanding. Husbands and wives have equal value. They are both created in the image of God as Genesis tells us, but they have roles that are designed to complement each other. The husband is entrusted with leadership and the wife is to respond to that leadership by offering her submission. This is a complementarian view of marriage.

It is a complicated issue. Christians disagree over it. But I thought it was important for you to know my framework as I approach this text.

Okay, so back to the text. When Peter says, *likewise*, he is referring back to 2:18 where he commanded servants to be subject to their masters out of reverence for God. It is reverence for the Lord that is to be the motivation for a wife to submit to her husband.

I think it is important to notice that Peter says to be subject to your OWN husbands, not to all men. This is a statement about marriage, not how all men and women are to relate.

We also must understand that submission is something that a wife, out of love, voluntarily chooses to offer her husband. The Scriptures never tell husbands to demand this. Submission means that a wife chooses to respect her husband's role as leader and she chooses to step under his leadership.

I believe that this command is part of God's divine order for the marriage relationship that Paul more fully develops in his treatment of marriage in Ephesians 5. Here's what Paul writes:

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

The basis of Paul's command is the nature of Christ's relationship to the Church. As the church is subject to Christ, so too a wife is to be subject to her husband. And husbands must love their wife in the sacrificial way that Jesus loved the church. This mutual action of husbands and wives offering themselves to each other models Christ and the Church. The husband loves his wife by offering his sacrificial service and leadership always seeking the best for his wife. The wife loves her husband by willingly responding to his servant-leadership by offering her own submission to him. That's the divine order of marriage that Paul describes.

Peter assumes this divine order, but his focus in his passage is on an evangelistic motive for submission and so he goes on and says:

¹ . . . 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.

In the day when Peter wrote this it was expected that a wife would worship the gods of her husband. And it was expected that she would not have friends apart from her husband's friends. A wife who followed a different God and went to gather with others for worship without her husband violated all kinds of cultural norms. It was a violation of an orderly home that was so important in that culture.

These wives were in a delicate situation. And so Peter urges wives to win their husbands without a word. They needed to be careful in this situation to not presume to instruct their husbands. They needed to live with *respectful and pure conduct*. One way that a wife could live out this respectful and pure conduct is addressed in the next two verses. Peter says:

³ 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.

Peter is not making a universal prohibition against these things; rather, he is emphasizing that what really matters is internal character, because that is what would win one's husband.

But there is a very practical reason for these instructions as well. As I just mentioned, a wife who worshipped a god that her husband did not and then who goes off to gather with other believers for worship without her husband was already doing something that would have been viewed as scandalous. If she were to go off to such gatherings, dressed in a way to attract attention it would intensify the scandal. She would be bringing shame on her husband. She would be living in a way that was detrimental to winning her husband.

And so Peter wants wives to focus on the internal stuff – having a *gentle and quiet spirit*. He doesn't want wives to be argumentative and grumbling and combative with their husbands. That would not win their husbands to Christ. But gentleness can. Having a spirit that is quiet because of faith in God can.

He then goes on and uses Sarah as an example of the kind of behavior that he is urging upon these wives.

⁵ 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.

Having talked about how a wife should be adorned, he says that the way the *holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves* was by doing exactly what Peter is commanding – they submitted to their own husbands.

Now, because we need to get to husbands, I don't have time to explain all of the possibilities of what exactly Peter is referring to here. I've included a note of the various views in my transcript if you want to go the website tomorrow and read that.ⁱ But the point is, Peter wants all wives to submit to their husbands and he uses Sarah as an example to support that command.

Now, as we think about application, one principle that Peter is making is that if you are in a situation where your husband is not a believer, and I think we could broaden it out to include believing husbands who are not walking with Jesus, your conduct can have a powerful influence on them. By submitting to them, by living with them with a quiet and gentle spirit, by respecting them, you proclaim the Gospel by your conduct. You can win them without a word.

Now, obviously, Peter is not giving guarantees here, but he is saying that this kind of approach is powerful. And so trust God to help you pursue this kind of life with your husband. Submit to him. Follow him. Respect him.

I asked my wife, Cindy, the other day what she would say to women who struggle to submit to their husbands. Here's what she said, "Ask Jesus what is keeping you from submitting. Ask Him if there is some kind of pride or fear or power struggle that keeps you from offering your submission." I think that is great advice. Talk to Jesus about this.

By the way, husbands, it might not be a bad idea for you to ask Jesus if you are making it hard for your wife to submit. In my experience, when I love Cindy like I should the issue of submission just never comes up.

Now, let's me add a couple of thoughts before we turn to husbands. First, wives, you are never commanded to offer unquestioning obedience to your husband. In our passage, these are wives had already refused to offer absolute obedience to their husbands when they began to follow Jesus. Scripture is clear that you must always obey God rather than any human even if that human is your husband. But I do think that Peter is saying that as much as it is possible to submit to your husband and still honor God first, do so.

Second, I want to speak to any woman right now who is in a situation where you are experiencing abuse in your marriage, whether it is physical, emotional or spiritual abuse. The command to submit does not mean that you just have to take the abuse. I would encourage you to reach out to a friend and get help. Reach out to someone here at Faith. We have men and women ready to listen, to help, to resource you, to stand beside you and help navigate what is going on. But please don't think that the command to submit means that you just have to take it. You don't!

Finally, let me say this to husbands. It is never your place to demand your wife's submission. Submission is always a wife's choice to offer. If your wife does not submit to you, I would point you back to the divine order. Your job is to keep loving her like Christ loved the Church. I'm thankful that in nearly 32 years of marriage I have never told Cindy to submit to me. I've felt like it a time or two, but I've never said it, because it's not my place.

Okay, let's turn our attention to husbands and look at verse 7. In the typical household codes of Peter's day, the normal thing to do after telling wives to obey their husbands would have been to urge husbands to MAKE their wives obey them, but Peter has a very different approach.

II. Instructions to Husbands (v. 7)

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.

As he did in verse 1, Peter begins by saying, *likewise*. Again, he is saying that it is reverence for the Lord that must be the motivation for how a husband treats his wife. And the core command for husbands is to *live with your wives in an understanding way*. Husbands are to be considerate and sensitive to their wives unique needs. They are not to be demanding.

He adds that husbands are to show *honor to the woman as the weaker vessel*. As Steve has mentioned before, in saying this Peter is acknowledging that in the cultural situation that he is addressing, men held most of the power – socially, politically and physically. And this has been true in most cultures and in most times. And so Peter is urging husbands to not use this power to dominate their wives. Rather they must *honor them* because they are fellow heirs of the grace of life.

In Peter's day, a woman's inheritance rights were typically subordinate to the man. But this is not the way it works in God's economy. Women are fellow heirs. They have the same rights of inheritance as men. In saying this Peter is radically elevating the status of women. And because women have this equal status with God, their husbands must honor them.

What is at stake for the husband in obeying this command? The quality of his relationship with God. If a husband does not live with his wife in an understanding way, if he does not honor her as a fellow heir of the grace of life, his prayers will be hindered. Why would this be? Well, if you do not honor your wife, if you do not live with her in a sensitive and considerate way, you are disobeying God. And disobedience always short-circuits one's relationship with God.

Okay, let's think a little about application for husbands. First, let me ask you, what is your focus as you think about your wife and the dynamics of your relationship? Is your focus on learning about her unique needs and seeking to meet them? Is it on honoring her? Or is your focus on whether or not she is submitting to you?

Whether or not your wife is submitting to you, Jesus' word to you is to focus on loving your wife by being kind and considerate to her, by seeking to understand her unique needs and meeting them, by honoring and respecting her. Don't focus on what she might not be giving you; focus on what Jesus' tells you to do.

This week I asked Cindy what I can do to live with her in an understanding way. Here's some of what she shared:

- Listen to my thoughts.
- Hear my perspective.
- See my strengths and encourage me in those things.
- Encourage me to be better in the things I love.
- Be my cheerleader.
- Understand that even though my ideas are different than yours at times, that doesn't mean that they are wrong.

There's a lot there for me to focus on there, right? If I want to live with Cindy in an understanding way, I need to work on these things!

Husbands, how about you ask your wives this week what they think it looks like for you to live with them in an understanding way. And then begin to do those things. And you know what, I think Peter is saying that if you will do those things your prayer life is going to improve!

Here's a last thought for husbands. Regretfully at times some men have felt like God's command that wives should submit to their husbands gives them a license to dominate their wives. I want to say this as strongly and clearly as possible. Men, to live with your wife in an understanding way means that there is absolutely no place for you to use your power to dominate or bully your wife. Ever!

If you are abusing your wife through any kind of physical, emotional or spiritual intimidation, you need to stop! Let me get specific. If you are putting your hands on your wife in anger, you are not living with your wife in an understanding way. If you are using the force of anger to manipulate and control her, you are not living with your wife in an understanding way. If you are neglecting your wife's unique and legitimate needs; if you are being harsh through your stone cold silence, you are not living with her in an understanding way.

If this kind of thing is happening in your marriage I want to ask you to do something that I know won't be easy. You need to tell someone. Tell me. Tell one of the other pastors. Tell a friend. Tell someone, because you need help to change this dynamic. You may feel so ashamed to have to admit this to someone, but it will be a huge act of courage. And it will be a first step to honoring your wife.

And so wives, submit to your husbands. A lot is at stake. You can win them without a word. Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way. Honor them. A lot is at stake. Certainly, the heart of your wife is at stake, as well as your relationship with God.

We are living at a time when the world around us needs to see how men and women should treat each other. Marriage has the potential to be one of the loudest and clearest messages of what right relationships between men and women look like. And so let's be husbands who

model godly love in how we treat our wives. And let's be wives who model godly love by how we treat our husbands. Let's do this before a world that desperately needs to see redemption modeled.

ⁱ Commentators differ on what the Old Testament reference here is. Some believe that this is a reference to Gen. 18:12 where Sarah called Abraham "lord." That's the only time we find her calling him "lord." Others believe that Peter is referring to Gen. 12 and 20 when Abraham, in fear for his life, asked Sarah to lie and say she was his sister. Sarah submitted to those requests. And so it is possible Peter is using this as an analogy to tell the Christian wives that they should follow Sarah's model of submitting to Abraham. In the same way that she submitted to Abraham though he was not walking in faith in these instances so too should they submit to their unbelieving husbands. Others believe that Peter is simply drawing upon Jewish tradition that lifted Sarah up as a virtuous woman and that there isn't one specific reference intended here. In Jewish tradition, Sarah was a virtuous woman because she obeyed her husband.