

Married for Good

1 Peter: Hope Away from Home

1 Peter 3:1-7

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People say some nasty things about Christians, don't they? You can avoid a lot of it if you stay off Facebook, but let's face it, not everyone likes us. Some people hate us. But if you think Christians get a bad rap today in the United States, it's nothing compared to the first century in the Roman provinces of Asia Minor. The apostle Peter wrote his letter to believers in that context.

Christianity had a bit of an image problem. Christians had a bad reputation in society. The pagans around them saw this new religion as not only false but dangerous and evil. False accusations and rumors were circulating. They were being slandered. If you went to the bathhouse or the marketplace, or wherever horrible things were said about people (they didn't have Facebook or Twitter in those days), you might overhear something like this being said about Christians...

"Have you heard about that new cult that's sprung up among the Jews? It started out small, but they're multiplying like cockroaches. If you ask me, they're dangerous. Those fanatics are upending the social order. They're tearing apart the very fabric of our society! For one thing, they don't participate in the temple worship, which I can't imagine the gods are very pleased about. These 'Christians' worship one God instead of the gods we all know, and the emperor of course. Who knows what consequences could be brought down on us? And they're always talking about freedom! We know where that leads. Freedom from the emperor. Freedom of slaves from their masters. Freedom from every social norm and standard.

"And the women. Don't even get me started about the women! (It should be telling enough that their cult is attracting slaves and women and every inferior creature you can think of.) This false religion is deceiving many of the wives in our city and making them insubordinate to their husbands. Wives who previously were respectful and proper are becoming rebellious, even refusing to worship the husband's household gods. And not only that, they go out in public without their husbands to attend their Christian meetings, and heaven only knows what kind of debauchery goes on there. Can you imagine the embarrassment as a husband? The utter shame of having your wife join these evildoers? I shudder at the thought."

How were these Christians to respond in the face of such slander? What do you do if you have a bad image? You need a PR campaign, right? You need to rebrand. Or you discredit your accusers. You get on Facebook and fire right back! No, actually that's a terrible idea. Peter says to do just the opposite.

He says, do good. He says it repeatedly over chapters 2 and 3 of his letter. Don't fire back. Do good. That will change their minds, at least some of them. "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." (2:12) "For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people" (2:15). Peter says to live within the social order in a way that is so obviously good that false accusations are silenced and the truth of the gospel is made evident. When you display good conduct, God accomplishes his purposes in the world.

Today's passage shows us how that can happen in marriage. It's a call for Christians to see marriage differently. Peter's charge for the Christians of his day is the same for us today: Display good conduct in marriage to pursue God's purposes in the world. We'll see what that looks like for wives and then for husbands. The world asks, "What can marriage do for me?" Christians ask, "What can God do through my marriage?" God can use your marriage for his good purposes in the world. You're not just married for you. You're married for good. And today's passage has a lesson for all of us—married and unmarried—that God can change the world through the basic relationships and roles that we live in every day, if we're willing to ask the right questions. Not, "What can this friendship, or this job, or this family do for me?" but "What could God do through me in this place, with these people?"

1 Peter 3:1-7¹

¹*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.* 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.* 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.*

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.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

WIVES, BE SUBJECT TO YOUR HUSBANDS. (VV. 1-6)

First, Peter instructs the wives. We can sum up what he says with a simple phrase: Wives, be subject to your husbands. If you want to display good conduct in marriage to pursue God's purposes in the world, that's what it looks like. Be subject to your husbands. I'll explain what that looks like in just a bit, but let's start where Peter starts: with God's purpose for this instruction.

God's Purpose: Conversion (vv. 1-2)

God's purpose is conversion. We see that right in verse 1: "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." Why be subject to your husband? What will it achieve? It's fascinating that Peter starts here, because it sounds like overly pragmatic reasoning. If he's going to tell wives to submit to their husbands, shouldn't there be some timeless spiritual truth behind it? I mean, there is. That's where Paul starts in Ephesians 5 when he deals with this topic. But Peter doesn't start there. He starts with something practical. What good is submission? It's because he's asking, "What can God do through marriage?" What could God accomplish through a wife submitting to her husband? Peter says: nothing short of the man's salvation. Husbands will go from disobedient to obedient, ignorant to enlightened, rebels to worshipers of God, because of the conduct of their wives.

That's a bold claim. They'll believe in your faith when they see your conduct. Is that realistic? Can good conduct really do that much? Can conduct really convert?

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Let me tell you part of my own story. I grew up in the church, but I walked away from the faith of my childhood because I had lost all confidence that God was real. I needed to be convinced. I needed some intellectual argument. I needed proof. At least that's what I said. Since there wasn't any, it was best to remain agnostic. In fact, it was downright dangerous to do otherwise. After all, look at how much harm had been caused throughout history by people who believed in their various religions with blind faith. Not me. I needed proof.

But it turned out that the proof I needed wasn't some rational argument. Sure, I did some research and got answers to my questions. But there was a bigger question than all of those. Deep down, the question wasn't, "Is God real? Is there proof?" The question was, "Does it matter? Does it make a difference whether God is there and whether I believe in him?" Everything I had seen of Christianity so far told me no. The kids my age at church said they believed in God, but they lived like atheists. Their conduct proved my disbelief. If God was real, he was useless.

But my experience with a friend's youth group at another church told me something different. I can't remember one specific instance, but I remember the feeling of being among them; I remember the impression it left. They loved God and loved others. They loved me. I saw people who lived like God was real and they knew him and it made a difference. I saw a different kind of proof. Proof that belief in Jesus wasn't just true, it was good. In a sense, I was won without a word by their conduct.

Now, people can't be won without a word in an absolute sense. They have to hear what Christ has done for them before they can believe it and trust in him. I didn't just observe the conduct of those high schoolers. I also heard the gospel. I heard how Christ had died on the cross for me. I heard, probably for the first time, about having a relationship with God. But their conduct proved that it was a relationship worth having. God used what I saw to confirm what I heard.

What does your life prove to those around you? Is the testimony of your actions useful for God's purposes in the world? Could God use your conduct to convert people from disbelief—or even hostility—to belief?

Good conduct is a testimony to all, but it's especially impactful to those who interact with us the most and have a front-row seat to observe our character. Your spouse knows if you just put on a good act in public or if you have integrity. They know what you're like when nobody else is watching. Peter is addressing a very specific group of people: Christian women married to unbelieving husbands. A large proportion of Christian converts were women, and often they converted before their husbands, so this was a major opportunity.²

Our conduct is also especially impactful when we do good to those who don't deserve it. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:43). As we saw last week, it's one thing to obey a good and gentle slave master; it's quite another to obey an unjust master. It's one thing to maintain respectful conduct towards a respectable Christian husband; it's another to respect a husband who does not obey the word. In many cases, these husbands would have been the very people slandering and demeaning Christians, their wives included. Their wives becoming Christians could ruin their reputation and even prevent them from holding certain offices.³ They had reason to believe Christianity was evil.

² Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 692

³ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

But Peter knows that loving our enemies speaks loudly. Enduring suffering at the hands of others and returning good for evil speaks loudly. Good conduct would speak louder to their husbands than a thousand airtight arguments for the Christian faith. In fact, arguing would only have proved all the accusations—“See, belief in Jesus does make wives insubordinate to their husbands!” No, these husbands had to first be won without a word. God could use their wives’ conduct for his purposes—to convict them, to sow doubt in their hearts with every accusation and insult, to plant the uncomfortable thought that maybe she was right all along—so that these husbands might one day say, “Tell me more about this Jesus you believe in.” Our lives should do the same.

Good Conduct: Respect and Purity

God’s purpose is to bring husbands to faith in Christ through the conduct of their wives, namely through being subject to their husbands. What does that mean?

As you probably know, the topic of gender roles in marriage is one that Bible-believing Christians disagree on, and today’s sermon is probably not going to settle the matter. To form a biblical understanding of men’s and women’s roles in marriage, we’d have to draw upon many different places in Scripture, and I want to let 1 Peter 3 speak for itself today. The thing is, Peter isn’t trying to lay out a full-blown theology of gender and marriage here. He’s trying to tell Christians how to live within the institutions that exist in order to do good to others. But he assumes or implies some biblical principles about men’s and women’s roles in marriage. Here are three principles that I believe Scripture teaches elsewhere but that this passage reinforces.

- 1.) Men and women are given distinct yet complementary roles in marriage.** It seems clear that men and women are given different roles in marriage, and it’s by God’s design. It’s good. And when we live out our specific roles as man and woman, it creates something beautiful. Peter reinforces this principle; he gives different instructions to men and women here.
- 2.) Both roles are equally valuable.** The fact that Peter spends so much time addressing the wives undercuts any notion that the woman’s role is less valuable or important. In fact, he shows that submission is crucial to what God is trying to do through marriage. Peter values women and their role just as the rest of the biblical authors do.
- 3.) We have some freedom in the details.** The Bible gives us principles and virtues rather than specific details like assigning tasks to one spouse or the other. So Peter gives us the principle of submission, but he doesn’t say that women have to do the laundry and men have to drive the car. That means we need to do the prayerful work of figuring out how to live out these principles today.

Ok, let’s dive into what this specific passage has to say about marriage. Remember, Peter wants everyone to display good conduct before the watching world. For wives, that means being subject or submitting to their husbands. He goes on to describe it as having respectful and pure conduct (v. 2). So there are two aspects to good conduct for wives: respect and purity. At face value, these are pretty simple and unremarkable concepts. They’re not exclusively Christian virtues. In fact, Greco-Roman philosophers would have promoted some of the very same values. Peter’s whole argument depends upon that! If they’re going to win over their husbands, they need to show that following Jesus doesn’t make you a bad wife. It actually makes you a better wife, even by pagan standards. But we’ll also see that there’s a distinctly Christian way of practicing respect and purity. Let’s look at these two aspects one at a time.

Respect

First, respect. I think we all have a sense of what respect is. We know it when we see it (and when we don't see it), and Peter gives a few examples to help us out. Like all the virtues in this passage, respect is not uniquely feminine. Everyone should show respect. Everyone should submit to others at times. Everyone should be pure. But these are an emphasis for wives as a part of their unique role in marriage. Respect means showing deference and esteem for one's husband. It means seeking to uphold his reputation rather than tear it down. It means accepting and supporting his leadership. As it says in verse 6: "Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord." She may not always have agreed with his judgment. She may have voiced some concerns. But ultimately Sarah trusted him and followed his lead. Respectful submission doesn't mean checking your brain at the door or saying yes to everything, but it does mean having a "gentle and quiet spirit," as it says in verse 4, not being argumentative or pushy or contrarian but seeking peace in the marriage and the home.

But what makes respecting one's husband different for a Christian? For one thing, its foundation is different. Pagan philosophers believed that women were by nature inferior to men intellectually and morally, and therefore they needed to submit. Christian submission is not degrading, and it's not grounded in ability. It's a noble calling grounded in God's purposes for marriage. A wife submits not because her husband is superior. She respects him not because he's respectable (otherwise how could she submit to a nonbelieving husband?). She does so because she's a servant of God, and that's God's calling upon her as a wife. And that means if respecting her husband would disrespect God, she chooses God. In Peter's context, it was expected that a wife would worship her husband's household gods. A Christian wife had to say no to that. There certainly would have been other, immoral aspects of life in Roman culture that she would have had to say no to, no matter the scorn it brought from her husband.

That brings up one more thing that makes Christian respect radically different. It's fearless. Look at the end of verse 6. Peter says, you're like Sarah if you "do good and do not fear anything that is frightening." Some of these husbands would surely use fear and intimidation to make their wives obey. But Peter says, don't submit out of fear—at least not fear of man. Don't fear anyone except God. Only God deserves our ultimate respect. And there's something winsome about a woman who's fearlessly respectful. She's not a doormat who submits to others out of fear. There are some things she can't compromise on. Her submission is based in freedom, the freedom that comes from fearing God alone.

Sadly, when we talk about fearlessly respecting one's husband, we have to deal with the reality of abuse. Let me be clear: this passage doesn't mean anyone should stay in an abusive situation. But it does tell you how to treat even an abusive husband. Even if he does not obey the word, even if he's as far from a Christian husband as you can imagine, let him see your respectful and pure conduct. Get out of the house and get help, of course. Separating might be the most loving thing you can do for him. But is there a way to do it that respects him, even though he doesn't deserve it? Don't stick around hoping he's going to change. But do good, even in a bad situation. Don't return evil for evil. Respect even those who don't deserve it because you respect God most of all.

Purity

The second aspect of being subject to one's husband that Peter mentions is purity. They're to have pure conduct, displaying an obvious moral purity. Being pure means being free from things that pollute. Free from lust, vanity, drunkenness—free from the passions of the flesh. Once again, this is

a concept that Greco-Roman culture they would have been familiar with. They would have agreed with Peter in verse 3: “Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.” Chastity and modesty were some of the highest feminine virtues for Greek moralists. They were appalled by women who put on gaudy clothing and jewelry to draw attention to themselves in public, suspecting them not only of being vain but seducing men with their looks.⁴

So this is part of submitting to your husband because acting in an impure, immoral way would have ruined his reputation. And Christian women were already suspect for leaving the house without their unbelieving husbands to gather with the church.

But just like respect, there’s a distinctly Christian way to practice purity. The word has the same root as “holy” in verse 5: “the holy women who hoped in God.” Holiness means being free from pollution, but it also means being set apart for God’s purposes. If your husband wants you to do something God disapproves of, you can’t do it; you must be holy as God is holy. You’re a child of Sarah. You’re in God’s set-apart family.

Holiness isn’t just a higher standard, the foundation is different. It’s not your husband’s reputation that’s at stake but Christ’s reputation. Ultimately, a wife is not trying to be pleasing in her husband’s sight but God’s sight. Look what Peter says in verse 4. Do you know why your heart is more important than what you wear? Because godly, pure character is “precious” in God’s sight. That doesn’t mean you can’t braid your hair or wear jewelry or makeup. You certainly should wear clothing. But that’s not what God values. He sees your heart. He sees your spirit. And when he sees your holiness, he says that’s precious, that is valuable, that is worth more than all the gold in the world. When you know that God sees you as beautiful and valuable and precious, you don’t need to draw attention to yourself. It’s God’s sight that matters. So you focus on having godly character and letting your appearance reflect that.

And that’s uniquely Christian. The world thinks they’ve got this figured out, but it’s not possible without God. “It’s what’s inside that counts” Everyone agrees with that. “Don’t be too worried about what others think” Of course. But the worldly version of this is based on self-esteem and self-love. And if we’re honest, that sounds pretty lonely. Or narcissistic. I don’t want to be loved by myself, I want to know that someone else loves me! That’s why in music and movies there’s always some special guy who comes along and notices your beauty when no one else does. “You don’t know you’re beautiful.” But what if there is no guy? The Bible says that even if nobody pays you an ounce of attention, even if you never turn a head, you don’t have to muster up your own self-worth. If you belong to God, he sees your heart and says that is a beauty that is imperishable, that is worth something, that’s precious.

There’s something undeniably winsome about a woman who’s fearlessly respectful and who’s pure because she cares about God’s eyes only. Worldly morality can’t produce that kind of woman, only Christ can. That’s why it has the potential to win people to the faith. Display good conduct in marriage to pursue God’s purposes in the world. Show that belief in Christ is not only true, it’s good.

⁴Jobes

HUSBANDS, HONOR YOUR WIVES. (V. 7)

I haven't forgotten about the husbands. Why does Peter write six verses to wives and only one to husbands? It's not because we've got things figured out, trust me. It's probably because there were more Christian women with unbelieving husbands. There were likely more female believers in general. And this section is addressing Christians who are suffering under various authorities: the government, slave masters, unbelieving husbands. A husband who converted to Christianity was far less likely to suffer at the hands of his unbelieving wife.

But the one verse we do have for husbands is crucial. Husbands, too, are under God's authority. So they're called to good conduct. We can sum up this calling pretty simply: Husbands, honor your wives. Verse 7 says, "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."

God's Purpose: Unhindered prayer

Once again, Peter gives God's purpose for good conduct. Here it's so that their prayers may not be hindered. God's purpose is unhindered prayer. What does that mean? God is not like a genie...do this or that and he'll grant your wish. It's not your conduct itself that causes him to answer prayers. But your conduct is evidence that you're in the family of God, and God listens to the prayers of his children. Especially if they're praying in line with his purposes in the world. And if you're treating your wife well, that's evidence that you have God's purposes in mind. If you're treating your wife well, it means you're not asking "What can marriage do for me?" but "What can God do through my marriage?" And God delights to answer that sort of man when he prays.

Prayer is God's purpose for good conduct. But what does good conduct in marriage look like for a husband? First, notice what it doesn't say. It doesn't say, "Husbands, make sure your wives submit. Make sure they're quiet. Make sure they obey." In other words, verses 1-6 are not yours to weaponize. Those verses are for her. This verse is for you, and it says nothing about enforcing submission. Certainly nothing that would justify abuse. Quite the opposite.

Good Conduct: Understanding and Honor

Peter says there are two aspects to good conduct for husbands: understanding and honor. The first phrase has to do with living in an understanding way with your wife—literally, living "according to knowledge." Knowledge of what? What do we need to understand? (The ESV changes the word order a bit here.) You need to understand that the woman is the weaker vessel. That sounds offensive to us, but it would have been uncontroversial and obvious to Peter's audience. What does he mean by weaker vessel? First, probably that women tend to be physically weaker, and second, because of their physical weakness and their status in society, they are vulnerable. They're in a weak position socially. In many ways they're at the mercy of men, especially in societies where they're regarded as inferior. So husbands, you need to be considerate and understanding of the fact that your wives are vulnerable in that way. Know that.

But the important thing is what you do with that knowledge. Sadly, the way of the world, the way of the sinful human heart, is to exploit those who are vulnerable. Men who ask, "What can marriage do for me?" can usually get what they want. We've all seen it, or done it to one extent or another. What do men want? They want someone to take care of the house, they want sex at regular intervals, and

they want everyone to stop talking during the football game. We want a woman who's going to submit and do what we want. And we can get it, through intimidation, or guilt. Or if we can't, we just check out of the marriage emotionally. "She won't meet my needs? I'll make her regret it. I'll withhold what she needs from me as a husband."

But Christian men are called to do something different with that knowledge. That's the second half of what Peter says to husbands. He says, "Honor your wives as heirs with you of the grace of life." Honor them. You know that they're vulnerable. But you need to know something else: in God's eyes, they are your equals. They are heirs with you. In Roman society, women were much less likely to be heirs. Not in the kingdom of God. They have the same inheritance as you. So treat them that way. Don't use their social vulnerability as an opportunity to exploit; use it as an opportunity to show honor. That's the same word Peter used in the last chapter when he said to honor the emperor. Don't treat her according to her worldly status, treat her according to her heavenly status. In God's eyes, she's royalty, just like you. Honor her.

What does this mean practically? Here are a few questions to ask yourself. I'm going to address them to married men, but if you're not married just think of the women in your life.

First, do you see the way God sees and value what God values? Do you affirm your wife's character as much as her looks? If God values what's inside more than what's outside, then we better do the same.

Along with that, the pornography has got to go. It's degrading to the woman on the screen and the other women in your life. And the more you look at it, the more it twists your mind and keeps you from seeing women the way God sees them.

Second, how do you talk *to* your wife and *about* your wife? Is it obvious that you consider her an equal and that you hold her in high regard? Even when you're hanging out with the guys? Cut the locker room talk out of your vocabulary.

And third, do you delight in dying to what you want? A worldly man can't tolerate not getting what he wants, so he takes it. A Christian man has authority, but he uses it with humility. He doesn't force his way. He would rather honor his wife by choosing to defer to her. He dies to his own wishes to serve God and honor his wife.

Christians should do marriage differently; we should do all of life differently. And when we do, others will take notice. When we display good conduct, we pursue God's purposes in the world. We show that our faith isn't just true, it's good.

But there's one last thing you need to know—men and women, married and unmarried. Good conduct isn't possible unless you know that you're an heir of the grace of life, unless you hope in God like Sarah.

Don't get the order mixed up. If you base your hope on your conduct, you'll end up hopeless because you'll always fall short. But if you base your conduct on your hope, you may actually do some good. Our hope is not in ourselves but our Savior, not in our conduct but the cross. If you're a sinner like me, who falls far short of what God calls us to, then the cross is the place to start.