

The First Letter of Peter
Today's Lesson: 3:1-12

- I. Introduction, 1:1-2
- II. The Possessions of the Believer in Christ, 1:3-12
- III. The Personal Conduct of Believers Together, 1:13-2:10
- IV. The Personal Conduct of Believers in Society, 2:11-5:11
 - A. In summary, 2:11-12
 - B. In submission, 2:13-3:12
 - 1. Saints to civil authority, 2:13-17
 - 2. Saints to masters, 2:18-25
 - 3. Saints with an unbelieving mate, 3:1-7

Throughout these submission paragraphs, the discussion has been about the conduct of believers considering authority that may or may not be congenial to their religious commitments. Peter's point is that kindness returned is not to be based on kindness received. Unlike the previous two "be subject" passages, this one is reciprocal (wives to husbands/husbands to wives). That Peter uses six verses to describe a wife's duties and only one to husband's does not suggest that (1) there were more women than men in the assembly or (2) that women needed more instruction than men.

The three "be submissive" passages suggest a progression from the broad and generic to the narrow and most personal: our duties to government, as employees, and in marriage (the most intimate and inter-relational).

- a. A challenge to wives, vv. 1-6

Three characteristics of the wife are commendable: submission, a beautiful inner character, and freedom from fear.

- 1) The command, v. 1a

"Likewise" or "in the same way" modifies "be submissive" suggesting a parallel between these instructions and the two previous (to governmental authority and slaves to masters)

As in the two previous cases, the extent of submission is not absolute; it is only to the limits of entitlement. Two insights are important in this regard: (1) status does not indicate importance or worth. The relationship of a husband and wife is hierarchical, but it is not a statement of superiority and inferiority. Wives are

“joint heirs of the grace of life” (v. 7). Though Christ was equal in status with God the Father, He was subordinate in function to the Father’s will. And while the wife’s function is to accept leadership, a husband must be a leader in the relationship. Some wives greatly suffer with a harsh leader in the home!

a) The situation, v. 1b

“If some” is a key to grasping the meaning of the passage. The phrase suggests that it would be unexpected or uncommon that most Christian wives among his readers would have non-Christian husbands. Thus, Peter is describing what he considers to be a fact (“if” being a first-class condition).

b) The potential, v. 1c

A believing wife with a mixed marital status has the potential of a deep influence over her husband as does a wife in marital Christian harmony. Note that the mode of her influence is behavioral. A nagging wife, or one who exchanges favors for compliance, is making a mistake. Peter’s point seems to be that a wife has a deep influence in her mate’s life.

c) The means, v. 2

The power of godliness is nowhere more apparent than in the most intimate relationships. “Chaste” means pure or free of moral defilement. Concessions to a mate’s evil are not the way to influence and no husband has the right to demand it.

Purity combined with respect of her mate is Peter’s way to improve a wife’s marriage! Here is the power of a godly example exposed (“without a word,” “respectful behavior”).

2) The power of inward beauty, vv. 3-6

External beauty is attractive to a male because that is the venue of initial interest for them primarily. They tend to be impressed with the obvious, which is temporal and passing. A man only comes to realize that the true beauty of his wife is in her heart, her enormous capacity to care, sacrifice, and give.

a) Stated, vv. 3-4

A wife that seeks to keep the affections of her mate by such will be fighting a losing battle of expensive facelifts, physical enhancements, and area reductions. While physical attractiveness is important, and should not be neglected, it will never be the bond that preserves marital harmony.

Though Calvin used v. 3 to imprison a female hairdresser in Geneva, Peter's prohibition is against the outward only. If adorning of hair is wrong, so is putting on clothing (I am sure that Calvin and Peter opposed female nudity). The issue is mere "external adornment." A woman should dress well for her mate; she should look attractive; and she should wear jewelry (even expensive jewelry), but it is not how reveal Christ to a husband.

"A gentle and quiet spirit" means that a wife is not to be pushy and demanding, not selfishly assertive. It is "precious in the sight of God" because it evidences trust in Him as opposed to a wife's manipulations to get her way.

This makes the most logical sense based upon what Peter goes on to say in the following verses.

b) Illustrated, vv. 5-6

1) A general appeal, v. 5

The point is that godly woman throughout the OT behaved toward their husbands with a gentle demeanor putting their ultimate trust for safety and security in God. Ancient women adorned themselves with an inward beauty (hopefully an outward one also).

*Boaz observed the actions of Ruth in the fields, not following young men. "...all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence (3:11)." Notice also that she made herself outwardly appealing to Boaz (3:3) with cleanliness, perfume and "your best clothes."

*Think of the Proverbs 31 woman. "Charm is deceitful, beauty is vain. But a woman who fears the Lord shall be praised (v. 30)."

2) A specific appeal, v. 6

Though Abraham was a believer, his behavior imperiled his wife on two occasions, at least, making her a model of a wife in her reaction to the ineptitude of her husband. To pharaoh of Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20), he asked her to concede to a half-truth to save his life while endangering her dignity. The same occurred in the Abimelech episode (Gen. 20:1-18), complicated by her already pregnant state with Isaac and endangering the promised seed that

Abraham waited twenty-five years to receive. However, Sarah called Abraham “master” and that is interesting. If she had chosen “husband,” she would have referred to him as owner [ba’al]. Abraham was her leader, not owner; his rights over her were limited. Following Abraham meant that Sarah needed to trust God in uncertain, unpleasant, harrowing, and dangerous circumstances!

Point: a woman focused on God will not be terrorized by the foolishness of an unbelieving or disobedient husband (it does not mean that she should refrain from talking to her mate about his stupidity)!

Through Sarah’s obedience, despite her husband’s foolishness, there was great gain for her. She became the mother of the faithful and the perpetuator of the promised seed.

b. A challenge to husbands, v.7

The harmony that a couple can experience is achieved in a mutual endeavor. The wife has responsibilities, but she is not alone in them. The husband is not commanded to submit to his wife, but he is to be considerate of her needs.

1) The instruction, v.7a

a) Two commands: “understand” and “honor”

What does it mean to “live in an understanding way” or “live considerably with your wife?” What is the knowledge a husband must have to fulfill his marital obligations?

- A wife’s desires, goals, and frustrations
- A wife’s strengths and weaknesses (physical, emotional, and spiritual)

The second command is that of bestowing honor. It seems to imply respect and trust as an equal before God. The word “woman” is instructive because it literally means “a wife’s femaleness.” Her femininity should engender respect!

2) The need, v. 7b

Peter does not explain the meaning of the phrase “weaker vessel.” In context, it may be that in the family the husband occupies the leader role, not the wife. Thus, the nuance of “weaker” may suggest their relative administrative positions. It could also suggest an emotional difference, a greater sensitivity to hurt and damage by an abusive situation. It

could mean a weakness in general that is not particular to all women, but one's wife.

3) The justification, v. 7c

There are no qualitative differences between the sexes in standing before God; there is absolute equalitarianism in spiritual privilege and eternal inheritance.

4) The negative consequence, v. 7d

Marital disharmony results, as does all discontinuities, in spiritual unhealthiness. However, the warning is addressed to husbands suggesting the "disobedient" husband to be won by a wife's godliness is a believer. Another argument that the disobedient husband is a believer is that they are addressed (there is no letter in the NT addressed to an unbelieving audience).

4. Summarized, 3:8-12

The section concludes as it began (2:11-12) with a general summary of our moral obligations toward each other (vv. 8-9) and ends with a confirming citation from the OT (the longest quote in the epistle [Psalm 34, quoted also in 2:3]).

a. The injunctions stated, vv. 8-9a

1) Stated positively, v. 8

The obligations are five: harmony, sympathy, love, compassion, and humility. These should characterize our community as believers.

- "Harmony" suggests unity of understanding and goals.
- "Sympathy" suggests mutuality of care giving.
- "Love" suggests the unselfish quest for the good of others.
- "Compassion" suggests emotional support.
- "Humility" suggests the opposite of pride and self-orientation; it means to act with a proper perspective of oneself in relation to others.

2) Stated negatively, vv. 9-12

a) The prohibited actions, v. 9a

The negative obligations are two. "Evil for evil" suggests retaliatory action while "reviling for reviling" abusive or insulting speech.

b) The proper action, v. 9b

Retaliatory behavior should not be a part of the life of one who has experienced the overwhelming favor of divine mercy. As Jesus taught us, we are to bless those who curse us.

c) The reason for the action, v. 9c

Having received from Him mercy (blessing, kindness), we are to extend that to others, even to those who are demeaning. The word for “blessing” in the first instance means “to speak well of a person.” The consequence is being “blessed” of the Lord, an “inheritance” that only increases when we give it.

b. The injunctions elucidated, vv. 10-12

Peter confirms his statements by quoting from Psalm 34:12-16a, the longest quotation in the epistle, and the second occurrence (2:3) in the letter. The point of the quotation is to sustain and explain the blessing-instead-of-cursing motif of the previous verse.

Is the blessing that the obedient receives in this life or in the future life? The weight of the context and the context of the Psalm is clearly about contemporary blessing.

“To love life” or “see good days” does not imply that a trouble-free life is available to us (“In this life you will have trouble,” said Jesus (John 16:33)). Instead, it means a life of contentedness in the life of God and enjoyment of His blessings regardless of outward circumstances.

“The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous” suggest more than the awareness of God; it means that He is providentially caring for us. This is not salvation by works; it is the contented life through obedience!

It is interesting that the sequence and topics in vv. 10-12, the quotation from the Psalm 34, are parallel to vv. 8-9. Here is a literary artist at work.

- enjoyment of days (v. 10a) equals character qualities (v. 8).
- restrain the tongue (v. 10b) parallels not insulting (v. 9b).
- turning away from evil acts (v. 11a) parallels v. 9a.
- promise of blessing (v. 9c) parallels v. 12.

The emphasis is upon two negative actions, the use of the tongue (v. 10) and evil actions (v. 11). The encouragements are that God “sees” (“His eyes are upon the righteous”) and “hears,” promising “good days” and “peace.”

Thoughts:

1. While a wife is not to be the leader in the home, it is often a sad fact that a husband’s demeanor in the family relationship may evidence a failure to be the leader; in fact, failure to assume the male role may be complicated by

failure to be a model of godliness in the home. In such cases, a wife who seeks to be a submissive person will find herself in difficult dilemma. Do you know couples that fit this description? Could it be true in your home or at least in some areas of your relationship? It would be good as a couple to ask each other if there are areas that a mate should assume more leadership or servanthood.

2. A wife has an enormously powerful influence in a family unit. How she conducts herself in her role is important in the life and health of a marriage. Usurping roles is detrimental as it is for the male who does not assume his proper role.
3. The influence of a wife over her mate should be through the example of a godly demeanor. It seems to me in the long run that it is more persuasive than words. It requires faith and trust in God to not take matters into our own hands when there is ineptitude, lack of wise choices, or failure to step up. Do you know examples of wives that lack a leader for a mate? You know what to tell them now!
4. We live in a culture that puts an enormous value in physical appearance. While that is not to be neglected, it is not the path to a strong enduring marriage. There is something far more important than that; it is the qualities of inward beauty that shines more radiantly than outward appearance. Do we work on outward things more than inward qualities of the heart? What are you working on these days? Do you know how to go about generating inward qualities of the heart?
5. While a husband is a leader in his home, he has no right to be a demanding autocrat; leadership is a call to submission in its own way. It is the duty of the husband to “live with his mate” in an understanding way. Husbands are to be life-long students of the lady that we have married. Do you make it a priority in your marriage to take the time to know how your wife feels, do you know what makes her happy and content, do you know her unique qualities, and do you know her fears and insecurities? Are you devising strategies that will help you understand how your mate operates?
6. The task of the husband in our passage is not only to be a leader in his home; he must honor the wife in the home. While the wife is called to respect her husband, the husband is required to treat her with dignity. Not only is he to love her, but he must also learn to cherish her as well. Are you seeking to do that in your marriage? In what ways would you say that you have a healthy marriage? In what ways can your marriage be improved? Can you share your insights together as a couple and grow? Do you see her as your equal in the marriage?
7. No marriage is without its tensions for at least three reasons: 1) males and females are vastly different in priorities, goals, and delights. 2) We are all creatures who have yet to experience the wonder of redemption; we all

have distorted values, objectives, and satisfactions. 3) We have all entered marriage with unexpressed expectations though we all thought that we understood each other more than we have subsequently come to realize. No marriage is without conflict unless one partner has completely capitulated their identity and feelings. That is a tragedy. All marriages are works in process. How much progress are you making? What areas are you working on as a couple?

8. That one has a mate that fails to function according to the dictates of Holy Scripture does not relieve either from fulfilling their responsibility in the marriage. If a wife would have difficulty in allowing the husband to lead in the home, he is not relieved from the duty to honor and understand. If the husband fails to lead, the wife must respect her husband. The duties of each are the remedies for dereliction. The refuge for a wife with a weak husband is to cast herself into the arms of God and trust Him to preserve and protect her family. The refuge for a husband with a disobedient wife is prayer. Prayer creates a gentle heart, healing many a hurt.
9. If you would say that your mate acts toward you in a manner consistent with the directions provided in our passage, you have something for which you should daily praise the Lord. If you have a mate that leads in your marriage, if you have a mate that honors and understands you, you are blessed indeed! If you have a mate that is more beautiful in inward qualities as she is in outward appearance, you are indeed blessed. Wealth and even health is not nearly as important as a solid marriage. Have you come to realize this and arranged your priorities accordingly?
10. Dysfunctionalism in human relationships is most readily observed in how we interact with those that displease us. It is easy to make a retaliatory, biting comment designed to denigrate or slam a door to vent our frustration. Such behavior is self-serving and destructive. A truly fulfilled, contented life is one punctured with care and compassion for others. A life of other-orientedness is like a well-watered plant; it will grow and blossom. A self-centered life, a life where “me” is everything (my rights, my pleasure, my way) is like a plant deprived of nutrients: weak, bowed, and unfruitful. Have you learned this lesson in your social relationships?