

1PETER 3:1-7 CBC 21.6.2020am

Peter has been teaching us about the privileges of the gospel, and how that gospel works in any situation. Today: how it works in marriage, including marriage to an unbeliever. But note: all of this is God's word for all of God's people. Whether we're married, or contentedly single, or hoping to be married, or once were married – we all need these words so that together we can build up the Body of Christ. **Read 1Pe 3:1-7 ...**

The Bible is very realistic. Some Christians will be married to an unbeliever; some Christian marriages won't be working as they should; and all marriages need God's wisdom. Here it is. Gospel lifestyle for wives and husbands.

1. GOSPEL LIFESTYLE FOR WIVES vv.1-6

Six verses to the wives, only one to the husbands! But not because Peter is down on wives. Rather, it takes six verses to give all the support he wants to give. He's talking to all Christian wives, with a special concern for those married to non-Christians, and his basic message is: let your life promote the gospel.

You will, I'm sure, have noticed that Peter uses the "S" word – submit! You may have bristled at it! And it's not the first time Peter has used it: "submit yourselves" 2:13 (all of us to authorities); 2:18 (slaves to masters); 3:1 (wives to their own husbands – not to all men). And also notice v.7: Husbands are to fulfil their role in the home "In the same way" - with the same servant-heart.

So this theme of "submitting ourselves" – men and women – runs through this part of Peter's letter. For life to work, we'll all have to do some submitting. For the world was designed by God, who is One God in three Persons who live in love with each other, including glad submission. And He made us in His image to relate to one another in the same beautiful way. It means we can dance together without stepping on one another's toes.

But our sin has made this a fallen world, and in our culture submission is a dirty word. Nobody wants to submit to anybody about anything. So it's tempting to simply pass over this bit for fear of being called hateful names, or because we're embarrassed by how the Bible's words have sometimes been misused. Yet our task is to listen to what God says, not to tell Him what we think He ought to have said. And since we know God is good and wise, His commands must be good and wise.

In fact, a moment's thought would show us that we all submit to one another from time to time, and without submission society would soon collapse into chaos and violence. Submission to others in different situations is normal life. Actually, we slip in and out of various submissions to one another. In my last church, we occasionally had a visit from the Mayor of Harrow. As he stepped from his limousine onto the pavement, I submitted to him, honouring him. Inside the building, he sat where I indicated, and sang the songs that I chose – he submitted to me! Incidentally, congregational singing can't work without submission! And after the service, I submitted to him again.

Submission is a normal part of any social activity. We're doing it all the time – when we stand to one side to let someone pass, or even when we listen while someone speaks. When people reject submission, they talk but they don't listen – think of the slanging matches on social media – people shouting and screaming without listening. Because listening requires submission.

To imagine we can have a world without submission is to live in fantasy-land. Our wills cross one another. What happens then? Either we voluntarily submit, or we fight – we try to subjugate those who are stopping us getting what we want. That ugly scenario is often the way of a fallen world.

But the gospel reverses this sinful way of ruining our relationships. God's wise and good rule teaches us to freely submit to one another in ways appropriate to the situation. It's actually an expression of LOVE, and it leads to human flourishing rather than mutual destruction.

And now Peter says it applies to marriage too. But great care is needed here! Texts like this have been greatly abused by men who've wanted to indulge their selfish arrogance rather than bless their wives. We can't ignore that horrible reality. Men teaching this text need real sensitivity to women's voices – and I welcome your feedback if you think I'm not being sensitive enough.

So let me say that if you're in an abusive marriage, that's not God's plan for marriage, that's the Fall. Get help immediately! And if you've endured such a marriage you'll probably recoil in horror when you read "submit". But the answer to what you've endured won't be found in saying "I'll never again submit to anybody" - that will leave you with a lifetime of conflict. What you endured wasn't submission, it was subjugation, and it was evil.

Because texts like this have been greatly abused (by men), let me show you *from this text* a few things that submission does NOT mean:

- Submission does not mean agreeing with everything your husband says. v.1: She's a Christian and he isn't. So she disagrees with him about ultimate reality – you can't get bigger than that!
- Submission does not mean passively accepting everything about your husband. v.1: she's seeking her husband's conversion to Christ!
- Submission doesn't include doing things that are wrong or enabling your husband's sinful behaviour. v.2: her conduct is pure, morally clean! Submission to Jesus relativizes submission to husbands (and to governments, employers, parents, etc.).
- Submission does not mean that a wife is to act out of fear. v.6b says, "Do what's right and don't give way to fear!" Christians are free people, and all Christian submission is freely given, not coerced by bullying.
- Finally and emphatically, submission doesn't mean inferiority. v.7: Husband and wife are joint heirs of salvation. Submission has to do with order, not value. Our Lord submitted to His earthly parents without any suggestion of inferiority. *Peter sees no difficulty in affirming both submission (v.1) and "heirs together" (v.7).*

What then is submission? It's encouraging a husband to do the job God has given him, namely to lead his family in the paths of godliness. And it's supporting his feeble efforts to do this, rather than making it more difficult.

For as Paul writes (Ephesians 5:31-32), marriage is designed by God to give us a picture of the gospel. In marriage we should see a reflection both of Christ's love for the church (as a man sacrifices himself for his wife), and the church's glad submission to Christ (as a wife submits to her husband's leadership). We enact a drama, and God has assigned the roles.

And listen to this: Peter says that you can play your assigned role even if you're married to an unbeliever. As you live a gospel lifestyle, you'll be introducing Christ to your unbelieving partner! That's exciting.

So Peter says (v.1), you can't nag your husband into the kingdom, but he may be won for Christ by the beauty of your life. You might think, "*Surely what a wife with an unbelieving husband needs to do is to put gospel tracts in his Weetabix every morning!*" But Peter says NO, what she needs to do is to live the gospel before him until he sees that it's made a difference. Even the dimmest man notices more than he lets on!

And pray that he'll see what's happening in your life and that God will soften his heart and open the door for gospel conversations. Because "without words" (v.1) doesn't mean never explaining the gospel – see v.15! But you don't need to force every conversation into a gospel presentation.

And if you constantly play worship songs at full volume, you may make it easier for him to go out with his mates.

It's up to God to change hearts. But it's up to us to live a gospel lifestyle by His grace.

And that's described in vv.3-4: *"Your beauty should not come from outward adornment ... Rather, it should be ... the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit."* NB: Don't go overboard – the passage isn't saying never dress up – it's comparative. Don't major on externals but internals – not appearance but character: *"the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit"* (v.4).

That's not Peter squashing a bouncy personality. He's not saying you can't be a lively and talkative extrovert. But don't be domineering, insisting on your own rights. Do you see what he's really saying? Who in the Bible has a gentle and quiet spirit? Our Lord Jesus (Matthew 11:29). Peter is encouraging these women to be more and more like Jesus, because then their husbands who won't listen to a sermon will glimpse the gospel.

You know the sad thing for those who only ever pay attention to their outward appearance? It becomes evident as they grow older that their beauty was only skin-deep. But the gospel produces a beauty that never fades – indeed, you can become more beautiful as you get older! And even if your husband doesn't appreciate you, your gentle and quiet spirit *"is of great worth in God's sight"* (v.4), because it shows you're trusting in Him.

Then you'll be like Sarah (vv.5-6). Although Sarah was outwardly beautiful, she adorned herself with the unfading beauty of godliness. You probably won't call your husband "lord" (even with a small letter "l") - he'd find that embarrassing, and the point is not to embarrass him but to love him as Sarah loved Abraham. But be like Sarah in trusting God in your marriage. Sticking with Abraham meant trusting God in some hair-raising circumstances. She hoped in God (v.5) and so (v.6) she didn't have to fear the cost of obedience in marriage. And neither do we, because God is at work for good.

2. GOSPEL LIFESTYLE FOR HUSBANDS v.7

What do you say to the man who complains that he can't get his wife to submit to him? You tell him that nowhere in the Bible does God command him to get his wife to submit! But then you go on to show him what God does command him in v.7:

"Husbands, in the same way (with the same gentle Christ-like spirit) be considerate as you live with your wives" - literally, "living together according to knowledge". Husbands, you need all the knowledge you can get that will help you to be a godly husband. That includes knowledge of what marriage is for (which means studying God's word). But also knowledge of your wife – asking about her hopes, fears, goals, feelings, frustrations. It's important to understand the problems she faces, including living with you! *Why not ask her, "What's it like being married to me? I really want to know!"*

Husbands are commanded "to live on the basis of knowledge". Which means that if you want to be the man God calls you to be, you're going to have to commit to regular study of God's word, and regular unhurried time with your wife. You may need to get rid of lesser ambitions and throw a few things out of your life to make time for what really matters.

And then (v.7), husbands must treat wives *"with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life"*. Peter isn't being patronising to women, he's being stern with men and warning them about abusing their physical strength. He's speaking in general terms, of course; not all husbands are physically stronger than their wives. But domestic violence then and now is mostly male on female. And God hates it as much as any secular feminist, and provides the answer in the gospel: your wife is just as much a child of God as you are. One day, husbands, we'll answer to God for how we've cared for our wife – God's daughter.

And even now, God will interrupt His relationship with us if we don't treat our wife properly: v.7: *"so that nothing will hinder your prayers"* - more literally, "so that your prayers may not be hindered" - the passive verb implies that God does the "hindering". That's part of His loving Fatherly discipline.

CONCLUSION

Gospel lifestyle for wives and husbands! For all the differences in detail, both wives and husbands are being told to live in a way that promotes gospel growth in their partner. Because that's what marriage is for. As we live like this, we grow in grace and the world gets a picture of God's committed, sacrificial, other-person centred love.

Is that challenging? Of course it is. It's a supernatural calling. But God's help is available. In fact, God will give us all the help we are willing to receive.

PRAYER: We thank you, Father, for your love for us in Christ. By your Spirit, make us like the Lord Jesus in our marriages and everywhere else, so that the world may see your goodness and be drawn to you; for your glory's sake. AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- *For everyone:* How can we help one another to have gospel-focused marriages?
- *For single people who'd like to be married:* Am I willing to live like this? Be honest with yourself.
- *For couples:* Where are we helping – and where are we hindering – one another in growing in Christ? Honest answers might make a difference!