

**1 Peter 3:1-7**

*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, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. 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, which in God's sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.*

*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 you can see, this is a passage about how men and women relate to each other in marriage. There are instructions here for wives and instructions for husbands. Today we'll focus on what it says to wives, and next Sunday we'll consider what it says to husbands.

And I'm aware as we do this, that what Peter says to us, indeed what the Lord says to us about marriages, is swimming against the current of our culture. This is the passage in the letter that is most likely to spark debate even among Christians. Here are a couple of reasons why.

For one, it doesn't fit with the secular, and oftentimes evangelical, worldview about men and women's equality. The thinking is that there should never be a role of leadership or authority that is exclusively for men and not for women. To say otherwise is offensive.

But this passage says things like this: *wives, be subject to your own husbands* – that is, yield to their leadership, be submissive to them. Categorically, all wives should do this. And it doesn't say that husbands are to be subject to their wives. So, it seems one-sided. It says something even more provocative: *Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord*. She used a term of authority, and she obeyed that authority, namely, her husband.

In our modern ears these things sound sexist and demeaning to women.

Here's another challenge we face with this text. We read it, knowing that many men have mistreated and abused women, including their wives. Sexual abuse by men has a lot of visibility in the news these days. So, words like *submit* and *be subject to your own husbands* can seem to be giving license to men to do whatever they want. It touches a raw nerve for many; defenses go up wondering if this passage condones such things, if it is anti-woman. And if a man in particular is teaching it, it can sound that way.

So both cultural pressure and in some cases traumatic personal experiences are causing many believers to move away from what it says; to reinterpret it in a way that seems less offensive, and more in step with the times.

We don't want to do that. Because God's word is good, and this passage is good. Romans 12:2 says God's will is *good and acceptable and perfect*. God's will for marriages is good and acceptable and perfect. It is to our own harm and it is to hinder the witness of the gospel to bow to the culture on this issue, as I hope to show you.

Obviously, this passage applies most immediately to those who are married. But it also applies to those who are not married. It prepares you for a future marriage should the Lord bless you with that. It equips you to reinforce and support biblical marriage in the lives of your married friends. And there is instruction here about the heart which applies to everyone.

So, with that introduction, let's seek the Lord and see what he has to say about wives.

Let's begin with the command in verse 1.

***LIKELIKE, WIVES BE SUBJECT TO YOUR OWN HUSBANDS...***

What exactly does that mean?

Well, the word *likewise* is a link to the verses which come before it. What's Peter been talking about? He's been talking about being *subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution* (chapter 2, verse 13). That is, God has put in place certain organizational structures, certain institutions for the order of society, and those institutions have those who lead them. So be submissive to the authorities God has placed in your life, yield to those who have a legitimate right to lead you and make decisions that affect you.

The first institution he talked about was civil government. He said be subject to the *emperor as supreme... and governors as sent by him* (chapter 2, verses 13-14). The second institution was employment. He said *servants, be subject to your masters* (verse 18). Our equivalent is the employee/employer relationship. And now Peter addresses the human institution of marriage. And in that institution, Peter says *wives, be subject to your own husbands*. That is, recognize that God has put the husband in a place of authority to lead this institution called marriage. He is to lead his wife. So wives, *be subject to your own husbands*. Submit to him. Have a posture of deference towards him. Follow his leadership. That's the command.

Now, as we've seen before, submission to any human authority in our lives is not absolute.

We submit *for the Lord's sake*, which means we recognize that the Lord is ultimately in charge. So, if the governor or your employer or your husband tells you to do something sinful, you *must obey God rather than men*, as Peter himself said in Acts 5:29. So a wife's

submission is not slavish, mindless obedience. It is intelligent submission that is driven by a commitment to Jesus.

Neither is submission about being a doormat for abuse. As we saw in chapter 2, verse 14 one of the roles of civil government is to *punish those who do evil*. God is a God of justice and when a husband does evil things to his wife, there is recourse for her protection, at least in a just society. There is a legitimate place for getting the protection of police, restraining orders and so forth in dangerous situations.

So we hear this command for wives to *be subject to your own husbands* within those boundaries.

Now, given those boundaries, Peter is saying, in fact God is saying (because this is his word), wives are to yield to their husband's leadership, to have a posture of deference, to respect their husband's role in the marriage. And wives are to do this, even when their husbands are not easy to follow.

Listen again to all of 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...*

Peter is thinking of women who have non-Christian husbands primarily, though the principle applies also to Christian husbands who are not always good spiritual leaders. *They do not obey the word*. They are not governed by the teachings of the Bible. The word is not dictating their actions toward their wives. They do what seems right in their own eyes.

Yet Peter says, *wives, be subject* to them anyway. *For the Lord's sake*. Because in his divine providence, God has given him that role of authority in your life.

Now, this is not to say that wives have no input into a husband's leadership; that they cannot be part of the decision-making process, that they can never bring correction to their husbands. They can and should. And we'll talk more about that later. But it is to say, that the posture of submission and the yielding to his leadership is God's command to wives.

Now, we can ask a question at this point.

### **WHY IS PETER TELLING WIVES TO DO THIS?**

Well, it's not because the wife is inferior to the husband. Verse 7 makes it clear that the wife is her husband's equal. To the husbands Peter says of their wives, *they are heirs with you of the grace of life*. We'll talk more about that next week, but it means you husbands don't have a higher status before God than your wives. You are both made in the image of God; you are equal in personhood and value, you both get the same *grace*. So don't think her submission means she's lower than you. She's not.

So why the call to submit? Is it just because that makes for a happy husband?

Well, Peter did not give this instruction at a marriage conference. It's good material for a marriage conference. I would definitely use it there. But when we think of a marriage conference, what are we typically looking for? Probably, we just want to have a better marriage, right? We want to learn how to communicate better, how to have peace in the home, how to have more intimacy – things like that. And this passage will help with that.

But that's not the context of Peter's letter. Remember, he is writing this letter to Christians who live in a non-Christian culture, who are *sojourners and exiles* in a world that largely despises them. And we're in the part of this letter where his instructions are all about how to live in that context in ways that can be seen by non-Christians and which may lead to their salvation.

Chapter 2, verse 12 says, *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.* All of these *be subject* commands are how we conduct ourselves honorably, how we draw attention to the fact that there is a God, his name is Jesus Christ, and these are the changes he makes in my life.

This submission that Peter calls for is about our witness to the non-Christian world. You want to show the world that Jesus is real and that he makes a difference? Then, *be subject* to the humans who lead human institutions, even when they are not good leaders: Emperors like Nero. Or employers who are unjust. Or husbands who *do not obey the word*.

That's how we conduct ourselves as Christians in a non-Christian world. It's easy to follow people who are great leaders. It's harder to follow those who are not. And most people won't do it. They'll rebel and curse and rant and wave signs and demand a new leader. But knowing the fear of the Lord changes us.

We know we have a good and loving and almighty God who is in charge. And he has sent his Son Jesus into the world to die on the cross for our sins. He has loved us with a love so great that he would willingly take our place and be punished for the wrongs we've done so that we can go free; so that we can be forgiven, so that we can be right with God and have an eternity to enjoy with him. We know we have *an inheritance* in a new heaven and earth that is *imperishable, undefiled and will not fade away, reserved* for us (1 Peter 1:4).

So we can handle bad leaders and wives can handle bad husbands because our hope is not in our leaders and husbands, it is in Jesus Christ and all of the promises he will keep to those who love him.

When a wife submits to her husband, *for the Lord's sake*, even if he does *not obey the word*, this *honorable conduct* draws attention to the reality of God and of Jesus Christ, and the

difference he makes in our lives. And that could be the evidence that leads someone to trusting Christ as Savior.

That's why Peter tells wives to *be subject to your own husbands*. It's about the gospel mission. It's about God getting glory. It's bigger than just marriage by itself.

And again, as in the previous passages, the Lord gives us instruction and encouragement for doing this, because this can be hard to do.

There are three descriptions of a wife's submission that I want to draw our attention to in this text, three descriptions of what her honorable conduct looks like. And I believe these are here to envision our ladies for the unique part that you play in testifying to the glory of Jesus on earth. It is a noble calling. So for the remainder of our time, we'll consider those.

Here's the first one.

### 1. A WIFE'S SUBMISSION IS INFLUENTIAL

This is from verses 1-2. Again, Peter writes, *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, when they see your respectful and pure conduct*.

The word for *pure* there is literally holy. It is holy conduct. It is conduct *for the Lord's sake*. It is conduct that is informed by Scripture. It flows out of her passion for Jesus. She wants to be conformed to the image of Christ. She wants to please God.

So, she submits to her husband according to the Lord's command. She shows him respect. She speaks of him to others without malice or slander. She speaks to him with affection. She listens to him. She supports him. She encourages him. She is a helper to him. All this as the overflow of a life that is clearly attached to Jesus Christ. And she does this, even if her husband does not obey God's word.

Now, here's the amazing thing that Peter says could happen when she does that. She could win her husband *without a word* when he sees her *respectful and [holy] conduct*. His conscience could be provoked by her Christlike example. He might end up repenting of his disobedience to God's word. If he is not a Christian, he may become one. If he is a Christian, he may become convicted of his sin and seek forgiveness and make changes to his life.

Now, he might not. Peter says *he may be won*. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:16 "*How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband?*" The answer is, you don't know. Because ultimately it is the Spirit who must change a person's heart. This isn't all on you. But he *may* be won over. And if he is, it will be your conduct that God will use to do it.

A voice from the past, a pastor named John Brown, said it very well in the 1800's. I want to quote him at length because I think this is just gold. Here's what he said.

Men who are prejudiced observe actions a great deal more than words. The cheerful, affectionate, constant performance of all marital duties, especially when it is made quite plain that this is the result of Christian principle, is fitted to make impression even on unthinking and insensible men. The difference that conversion has made to the better on the relative conduct of the wife, almost necessarily leads the husband's mind to what has produced it and gives birth to the thought: "That cannot be a bad thing which produces such good effects." His prejudices are gradually weakened. By and by he, it may be, voluntarily commences to talk on a subject on which formerly he had angrily forbidden all conversation, accompanies his wife to the Christian assembly, and ultimately listens to, believes and obeys the Word that he has formerly rejected. ...

And by the accompanying blessing of the good Spirit, this has not unfrequently been its blessed effect.<sup>1</sup>

Let that be an encouragement to you wives. You have the apparent misfortune of being married to a man who needs your help, and who will often go astray. He may not even be a Christian. But your godly submission is influential.

I know that I've been out of line many times in my own marriage. I've made some pretty stupid mistakes. And I've sinned against Mary many times. In our early days I was sometimes so critical and argumentative that I remember her suggesting several times that we should go see a marriage counselor, or at least bring another couple into it. But in my pride I always said no, because I didn't want my sins to be exposed. But she was patient with me. She persevered. She continued to love me. She "performed her marital duties from Christian principle." And it convicted me.

*Even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct.*

The principle is this. When a husband does not obey the word, it will take more than the word to win him over. It will take conduct. It will take submission.

It seems counterintuitive. The world's advice is that if you want your husband to change, you get in his face, you challenge, you demand, you make his life hard. That's how we want to handle things in the flesh. But scripture shows us a different way – godly submission. That is influential.

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<sup>1</sup> John Brown, quoted from *Free Grace Broadcaster*, Issue 242 (Chapel Library), pg. 38

Here's another thing the Scripture says.

## 2. A WIFE'S SUBMISSION IS BEAUTIFUL

We see this in verses 3-6. *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, which in God's sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord.*

There's a lot in there, but the theme is *adorning*; it is about what a woman does to make herself beautiful to others. What you are adorned with is what attracts people's attention.

So what does a wife who is holy, who seeks to follow Christ, adorn herself with to make herself beautiful? Peter says it's *the hidden person of the heart* which leads to *submitting* to your own husbands. That's what's beautiful.

I think that is the logical connection here. He says *let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart*. Then he says... *This is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands*. So *submitting* to your own husbands is the outward adornment that springs from the inner adornment of *the hidden person* of the heart, which he describes as *the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit*.

This is true beauty; this is what is *very precious in God's sight* (even when it is not precious in your husband's eyes or anyone else's for that matter). A wife's submission is beautiful before God, and what God says is beautiful is fundamentally beautiful.

So let's talk about the contours of this beauty. There are phrases here just begging for explanation. The first one is this: *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...*

Is Peter saying there that women should not try to look nice? That they should not dress in pretty clothes, not do their hair up nicely, and never wear jewelry, especially expensive jewelry like that made of gold?

Not at all. Again I quote from John Brown from long ago. Listen to what he says about this verse.

The negative direction is, "Let not the adorning" of Christian wives – and the remark is to Christian women generally – "let not their adorning" be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair and of wearing of gold, and of putting on of apparel. Some have considered these words... as an absolute prohibition of Christian women, artificially to dress their hair, to

wear ornaments composed of gold, silver and precious stones, or to clothe themselves in any garment but what is plain and unadorned. I think Christian women may very easily fall into more dangerous misinterpretations of Scripture than this; yet I have no doubt it is a misinterpretation. [Who says these old theologians didn't have a sense of humor!]

The words before us do not contain positive prohibition of all ornamental dress; but they are a statement that these ornaments were not for a moment to be compared to ornaments of a higher kind. ...The passage before us means, "I pay more, far more, attention to the adorning of your minds and hearts with Christian graces and virtues, than of your bodies with jewels and splendid apparel."<sup>2</sup>

If I could sum up the argument he makes there, I would put it this way. Ladies, married or single: pay more attention to your heart than to your hair. And specifically, put on the *imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit*.

So let's talk about that. What is a *gentle and quiet spirit*?

Well, first of all note this: A *quiet spirit* does not equal a quiet mouth. (Although, if your mouth gets you into trouble, you may want to make adjustments! There are plenty of Scriptures about the use of the tongue.) But a *quiet spirit* does not mean a woman is silent all the time.

Mary, pregnant with Jesus, was not quiet when she burst into a song of praise after meeting Elizabeth. She said, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*"<sup>3</sup> Hannah was not quiet when she presented her son Samuel to Eli at the temple and said "*My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation.*"<sup>4</sup>

We know from Genesis 2:18 that a wife is a *helper fit for [a man]*, and one of the things that he needs is for her to talk, even to bring him correction when necessary. Pilate would have done well to listen to his wife as he sat on the judgment seat deciding what to do with Jesus. *His wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream."*<sup>5</sup> Too bad for him that he did not listen to her!

So what does it mean to have a *gentle and quiet spirit*? Well, it is a trusting and resting in God that enables faith-filled submission.

The word *gentle* is the word for meek. Jesus used it in the Beatitudes. "*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*" (Matthew 5:5). Combined with *quiet*, it simply means a

<sup>2</sup> John Brown, quoted from *Free Grace Broadcaster*, Issue 242 (Chapel Library), pg. 25

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:47

<sup>4</sup> 1 Samuel 2:1

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 27:19

woman who is not demanding her own way, not grasping for her rights, not selfishly asserting herself. Her *spirit* is *quiet* because she is trusting in God, who has promised her that she will *inherit* the earth! The new heaven and earth. Life eternal.

She can handle the challenges and disappointments of marriage because her hope isn't ultimately in the marriage, it is in God. Peter says *this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord*. The heart that hopes in God is a heart that can submit to an imperfect husband. And this is beautiful in God's sight.

Now, that part about Sarah needs some brief explanation; we can't just leave it hanging there. Is Peter saying that wives need to call their husbands 'lord'? Is that the application he is making?

And the answer is no. It is the principle of submission that Peter wants to transfer, not the specific actions of submission. We should be careful not to carbon copy all the details of someone else's historical situation into our present day setting.

If Peter had said, "wives, call your husband 'lord'" then we'd know that is for today. But he doesn't say that; he just uses Sarah as an example of submission. What does transfer is the principle. And in Sarah's case, the principle is that she recognized her husband Abraham as the authority in their marriage. That's what the term 'lord' represents. It was a term to recognize someone's position. It was appropriate in her day. It is not appropriate in our day, though the heart behind it is totally appropriate.

We must move on. There is one last thing to say about a wife's submission. It's this:

### 3. A WIFE'S SUBMISSION IS COURAGEOUS

This comes from verse 6. Concerning Sarah's example, Peter says, *And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening*.

Literally, you *do not fear* any intimidation, anything that could paralyze you in fear and make you stop doing good. Peter doesn't specify what might intimidate the godly submissive wife. And so there is a range of opinion on that. One translation has it as "you do what is right without fear of what your husbands might do" (NLT). Others like the ESV leave it open-ended.

But I think we can say this much for sure, wives who submit to their husbands for the Lord's sake are courageous women. She does good, including be subject to her husband, and does not fear what the consequences might be, even when her husband does not obey the word, but she does.

Perhaps what is intimidating is the possibility that her husband will just take advantage of her submission, take her for granted, that he will never change, and that the marriage will never be what she hopes it to be. That could be a fearful thing for her. Submission is a courageous thing to do in the face of that.

Or, perhaps for our cultural moment, she could be reviled by others who mock her for her submission, saying she's overly religious, or stupid, or mindless, brainwashed by men. That could be intimidating.

Or, what could be intimidating is any life circumstance that accompanies faithfulness to Christ and his will for her. Having to live with your husband's small income; inviting opposition from non-believers by testifying to Christ; raising kids in the faith in a secular world. There are a lot of things that could be intimidating.

But because she is trusting the Lord, because she knows that she has a *Shepherd and Overseer* of her soul (as Peter mentioned earlier) she is not intimidated. She does not *fear anything that is frightening*. This is the Proverbs 31:25 woman of whom it is said, *Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come*. She moves forward with courage.

There are many courageous wives among us, and many courageous single women who model this. This is honorable conduct that tells the world there is a God who saves, one who can remove your fears, one you can put your trust in. It's a great witness to the world.

Let me close with one last thing. I'll put it as a question that some wives might be asking at this point.

#### **WHAT IF I'VE BLOWN SUBMISSION?**

What if I'm convicted that I haven't done a very good job at this?

You might be sitting there with memories. There were times you did assert yourself and demand your rights; times you weren't respectful and said terrible things, times when your conduct was anything but holy. You wish you could take that back but there it is, and there may be serious consequences that you now live with. And so there is guilt and regret.

Let me encourage you with an observation from the passage.

We read about Sarah here, and about how Peter held her out as an example of godly submission. He called her a *holy woman who hoped in God*, who *adorned herself by submitting* to Abraham.

Do you remember what Sarah's life was like?

She's the woman who got impatient with God's promise to Abram of offspring and took matters into her own hands.

In Genesis 16, she said to her husband, "*The Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.*" And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai [as she was still called].<sup>6</sup>

Bad plan. Because the son that Abram would have with her servant Hagar, and that son's offspring would become a thorn in the side of the people of Israel for generations. Of Ishmael God said, *He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen* (Genesis 16:12). Sarah enticed Abraham into a foolish and destructive act that had generational consequences.

Not exactly submissive. Especially not her reaction when Hagar actually got pregnant with the son Sarah prompted Abram to conceive. She said, "*I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!*"<sup>7</sup> I can just imagine Abraham thinking, "Wait a minute; this was your idea!"

No, Sarah wasn't a stellar example all her life of godly submission. She had some stains on her record. And yet, here Peter says she was a *holy woman who hoped in God*. And you are *her offspring* if you trust the Lord like she did.

What do we learn from that? We learn that the Lord forgives all those who hope in him. Because this is the last mention of Sarah in the Bible. This is the way she goes out of the story so to speak. And what does the Lord want us to remember about her, flawed as she was? She *hoped in God*. She was adorned with *the hidden person of the heart*. She was beautiful in God's sight. That's how God remembers Sarah, as beautiful, as a spotless bride, because he forgave her sins through Christ.

And so it is with you, dear Christian sister. You have memories, you have failures and sins on your record. But because you too have *hoped in God*, all is forgiven. You will go out of the story of this world blameless in Jesus Christ, and welcomed into eternal glory.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 16:2

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 16:5