



Session 6

2:18-3:7

Study Guide

This is one of the most troublesome pericopes in all Scripture. The verses *slaves accept the authority of your masters* and *wives accept the authority of your husband* have been used over the centuries to justify and perpetuate the oppression of women and people of color.

Commentators have often tied themselves in knots trying to explain much of this away. I believe a more honest, faithful response is to acknowledge what should be obvious: whatever we believe about the authority of Scripture, these verses cannot be applied literally to today. To a significant degree, they simply speak of a truth that may have been true then but is no longer true now. It is imperative, therefore, that this pericope be engaged within a) the context of Scripture as a whole and b) the social and cultural context of the time in which 1 Peter was written.

Here are a few things to keep in mind. First, however we feel about slavery and patriarchy today the fact is that they were part and parcel of near-Eastern society then, particularly in those areas under Roman control reflecting Roman values and social practice. Second, the Israelites themselves—and the author of 1 Peter is not an exception—lived in a very patriarchal society.

That said, we want to focus on larger, more fundamental messages in the pericope that are not socially and culturally specific but true of all times and all places. These verses ultimately are about three things: **suffering**, **obedience**, and (perhaps oddly) **effective evangelism**. If we take slaves and wives out of the equation, we can understand that the demands being made are demands of Jesus followers who are (or should be) living as resident aliens.

2:18-25

1) These are verses about the appropriate way to respond to unjust suffering. How does Peter distinguish between just and unjust suffering?

2) How is Jesus an exemplar of how we, as his followers, are to endure unjust suffering and why would enduring it in this way be important?

3) Remember from our discussion of verse 2:16 in our last session where Peter admonishes us to use our freedom in Jesus not as a pretext to behave any way we wish but to “do the right thing.” Do you see any connection between what Peter says in that verse and what he is saying here?

3:1-7

These are verses about the importance of obedience and effective evangelism.

4) Mindful of what Peter has said earlier in the letter about obedience—particularly obedience to authority—how do you think we are to understand obedience in these two verses?

5) Remember from our very first session we said that it appears the churches to which 1 Peter was written contained a significant percentage of women who followed Jesus married to men who did not. This suggests a number of women involved in the church *on their own*. We’ll return to this point below—it is **extremely** important.

6) We’ve talked a great deal in other contexts about the importance of *lifestyle evangelism* as a way of growing the Kingdom. How are Peter’s comments about a wife being submissive to her husband an endorsement of lifestyle evangelism (and it has nothing to do with submission)?

7) We need to say something about verse 3:7 because it contains a statement that is particularly egregious, referring to women as “the weaker sex.” It is possible that Peter is talking here about the physical strength of a woman relative to a man, but I suggest that really isn’t the point. Read verse 7 carefully. The case can be made that the significance of this verse is in the fact that men are to honor women equally because they, too, are heirs to salvation and followers of Jesus.

Now return to question 5 above where I say that the fact women are involved in these churches on their own is extremely important. In the Roman culture in which the recipients of 1 Peter lived, the religious life of a woman was typically dependent upon and ultimately subservient to that of her husband. In other words, women did *not* have religious lives on their own. It’s supremely ironic, therefore, that in a verse that can be read as egregiously sexist, Peter is, in fact, saying something remarkably radical. What is it?