

1 Peter 3:1-7
(Genesis 1:26-28; Matthew 26:6-13)
“Heirs Together of God’s Grace”

Introduction

Peter has been describing what it looks like to follow Jesus in the hard places of life, and we come this morning to his description of the most basic unit of any society, the family: the place where, for each of us, our personal mission begins. Husband and wife form the most fundamental and foundational community in any culture, a community that is meant by God to reflect and display his own loving and self-giving life within the unity of the Trinity. If the picture of a healthy marriage is about as close as humans can get to a picture of the life of God then we should not be surprised that one of the supreme marks of our rebellion against God, and of our resulting alienation from him, is the difficulty that we all experience in being the kinds of husbands and wives who make marriage a blessing and joy for our partners.

Unlike Paul’s marriage advice, the advice of a bachelor who considered the single life preferable for serious Christians, Peter writes as one who knew both the joys and difficulties of marriage. In the gospels, the first time we read of Jesus visiting Peter’s home, we learn that Peter’s mother-in-law lived with them (Mark 1:30). Paul would write of Peter having a wife to take with him on his travels (1 Corinthians 9:5). So Peter understood from the inside out the challenges of being on mission with a wife and family.

At first, his words sound strange and even disquieting to modern ears: the language of submission, particularly of wives submitting to their husbands, and the description of a woman as “the weaker vessel,” sound terribly outdated, prejudicial and even unjust. However, if we understand Peter’s cultural setting, we will realize he is actually speaking words that are moderate and gracious, intended to liberate, not enslave. The women and men of his day would have been astonished at his words, because he affirms the rights and worth of women in a way that no one outside the church would have thought to do in the first century.

Women in the Roman Empire were property owned by their husbands, just as children were owned by their fathers and slaves by their masters. The Roman husband had the right to do with his wife as he wished. He was empowered by Roman law to be, literally, the potentate of his home. So for a woman who had become a Christian to oppose her pagan husband in the name of her newfound freedom in Christ might well be to sign her own death warrant, as well as to bring Christianity into even greater disrepute, and to subject other Christians to even greater persecution than they were already facing under Nero. And, more importantly, it was to fail to understand how spiritual power really works within God’s kingdom.

As for the woman being “the weaker vessel,” this was simply an undisputed truism in cultures that evaluated strength physically, and it was the very reason that women were

less valued than men in the ancient world. Peter turns this on its head by calling on Christian husbands, not to dishonor and take advantage of their wives as physically weaker, but rather to *honor* them, for the crucial reason that – unlike the surrounding culture where women had no inheritance rights, except through marriage, and then it was her husband who inherited – in God’s family, men and women are *heirs together* of the grace of life (3:7).

The counter-cultural, even subversive, nature of the gospel is too easily missed by those of us who live in societies whose views of justice were shaped by the biblical view of things, cultures that stood in stark contrast to the surrounding pagan cultures in the value that they placed on the weak and powerless, and for the dignity and honor that they demanded be shown to all people within the household of God, whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor, slave or free.

So this morning, I would encourage us to look at four counter-cultural contrasts found in these verses, contrasts just as radical today as when Peter first wrote them, and see how understanding and embracing what he is writing here would still help Christians on mission turn our little worlds upside down, not to mention experience far greater joy in our marriages.

Body

1. An exhortation addressed specifically to wives that applies to us all (3:1-6):

Don't try to win your spouse through words but through deeds (3:1).
Don't focus your life on looks but on character (3:2-6).

2. An exhortation addressed specifically to husbands that applies to us all (3:7):

Don't try to win your spouse through strength but through respect (3:7a).
Don't focus on praying to live but on living to pray (3:7b).

Conclusion

What at first may sound archaic, a word from an irretrievable, ancient past, becomes a fresh and challenging word to us when we read it in context and understand that Peter is calling us to live countercultural lives for the sake of the mission God has entrusted to each of us: the mission of reclaiming the world for him, beginning with the most basic social unit in every culture, the family. Our mission always begins at home, and we neglect it to our peril and put at risk our own effectiveness every in every other circle of relationship. To *both* men and women the word is clear: “let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart and the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious” (3:4).

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