

OVERVIEW: 1 PETER 3:1-7

These verses might sound jarring to modern ears. Particularly as associating wives with words like 'submission', 'obedience' and 'weaker partner' will (often for good reason) sound alarm bells for those concerned with encouraging abuses of power, misogyny and sexism.

How significant is the historical context?

This passage isn't encouraging women to marry non-Christian husbands. In the first century, compared to the west today, wives had less autonomy in regard to who they married and less avenues to leave a marriage. This may help explain the relatively large amount of verses addressed to wives (compared to the instructions to husbands). Like the instructions regarding the citizen and the secular authorities (2:13-17), the slave and the master (2:18-15), the instructions to the wives are addressed to Christian women who are thinking through what it looks like to live a distinct and Godly life, in a social setting that they had little choice to change. Yet it is important to note that there is nothing in the instructions themselves that only applies to first century marriages. The instructions are as relevant today as they were to the original readers.

What does 'in the same way' refer to (v1, v7) ?

It is often assumed that this phrase that introduces the instructions to wives (v1) refers to the previous instructions given to slaves (2.18), since both instructions (to slaves and to wives) are followed by the instruction 'submit yourselves'. However, the 'in the same way' phrase is *also* used to introduce the instructions to husbands (v7, which *isn't* followed by the 'submit yourselves' instruction). It is better to understand that wives and husbands are to think about how they are to live 'in the same way' as the example of Christ (2:15-25), which is the central reference point to all the verses between 2.18-3.7. So if you were a slave in the first century, the death of Jesus for you, and his behavior as he died, was to profoundly affect how you behaved as a slave. It made a difference. If you are a Christian wife, or a Christian husband, the death of Jesus, and how he behaved as he died for you is to profoundly affect how you behave as a wife or as a husband.

What is meant by 'submit yourselves'?

Submission is not unconditional or enforced obedience, but rather one person voluntarily choosing to put themselves under the responsibility of another. It is never an instruction given for one party to enforce the submission of another. This language can never be used as a justification for domestic abuse (or even the endurance of domestic abuse). This language rather points to the fact that God has created and designed good differences between husbands and wives, and different responsibilities in the marriage relationship. The call for wives to submit themselves, is an invitation for wives to not seek independence from their husbands, but to go *with* the grain of God's good design for marriage.

Why are wives referred to as 'the weaker partner'?

This phrase jumps out to us today, because we're so used to hearing that husbands needs to be reminded that their wife is their equal. So we might assume it to read 'treat (your wives) with respect as the equal partner', which of course is true (in terms of worth, status and value as God's image bearer). Yet the point of this passage is not to teach husbands and wives to be the *same* as each other in their marriages, but how they are to show Christ-like love towards each other, with particular regard for the responsibilities God has entrusted to them. In this case the phrase 'the weaker partner' is less controversial than it might initially appear. It seems to be acknowledging the general pattern of a physical power imbalance between men and women, and the potential for physical and other types of abuse from a husband towards their wife. Tragically we know this trend exists today in many parts of our society. The instruction for husbands is to not use their physical power to dominate, belittle, or to mistreat their wives, but rather to show them honour and understanding.

GODLY LIVING: MARRIAGE - 1 PETER 3:1-7

GETTING STARTED

1. In what ways might we as a society have progressed in our attitude to marriage? In what ways might we have regressed? What do you think has been driving these changes?

INTO THE TEXT

Read 1 Peter 3:1-4

2. The assumption in this verse is that the unbelieving husband has already heard the gospel (perhaps from his wife). What do you think is unique about the marriage relationship, where actions can speak louder than words (in 'winning' a non-believing spouse to Christ)?
3. Wives are called to distinctive 'purity and reverence' (v2), how does v3-4 help us understand what this looks like in practice?
4. In what way do you think the modern day industry devoted to promoting beauty and body image is enslaving? How might v3-4 be a liberating antidote for Christian wives (rather than a controlling restriction)?

Read 1 Peter 3:5-6

5. What do you think is significant about the reference to Sarah? Why might the promise to be one of Sarah's daughters be bigger than a reference to just being *like* Sarah?
6. What are the kind of fears that might lead you away from trusting in God if you are married?

Read 1 Peter 3:7

7. The phrase 'in the same way' is used to introduce the instructions to husbands, referring back to the example of Christ (2:14-25) but there is no 'submit yourselves' language here. What language is used instead? Why do you think this is?

8. The 'weaker partner' or 'weaker body' refers to the general differences between physical strength between men and women (rather than value, intelligence, gifts, status etc...). How does the example of Christ (who clearly possessed more physical power than those around him) radically reshape how husbands are to behave towards their wives?

9. One of the key activities husbands and wives are called to do together is to devote themselves to prayer (cf. 1 Cor 7:5). How might a husband who is *not* treating his wife with honour, understanding and consideration, be hindering his prayer life with his wife (not just in terms of the frequency of their prayers, but also their quality) ?

TAKEAWAY

10. *For those who are wives*, what does it look like for you to submit yourself to your non-believing husband? What about if your husband is a believer?

11. *For those who are husbands*, what does it look like to show honour and understanding towards your wife, *so that your prayers are not hindered*?

12. *For men who are not married, but hoping to be* what does it mean for you to seek a wife where her beauty is not defined by outward adornment, but by a heart that trusts the Lord? How does this change the way you relate to, think about and talk about women?

13. *For women who are not married, but hoping to be*, what does it mean to seek a husband whose strength is not defined by his physical power, his vocation or career path, but by his priority of prayer, and seeking to direct honour away from himself onto others?

14. *For those who are single*, in light of today's passage, what does it mean for you to honour and support the marriages in our church community?