

# “The Beauty of a Gentle and Quiet Spirit”

## The Sixth in a Series of Sermons on 1 Peter

**Texts: 1 Peter 3:1-7; Genesis 18:1-15**

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Christians in America do not face the same kind of persecution which Christians among Peter’s first century audience were facing. Many of those to whom Peter was writing were forcibly displaced from their homes and land by an edict from a previous Roman emperor Claudius, because they refused to worship pagan deities, and refused to consider the Roman emperor to be a “god.” Peter speaks of these struggling Christians as elect exiles and describes them as a chosen race. The Apostle is writing to remind them of their living hope and sanctification in Christ, which will help them cope with the very difficult circumstances which they were then facing. Peter’s original audience experienced open hostility from their government and their pagan neighbors. The opposition we face is much more subtle, but no less dangerous. In the thoroughly secularized America in which we live, we are not persecuted so much as we are pressured to conform to non-Christian ways of thinking and doing. Peter’s discussion of the relationship between husbands and wives will expose some of these non-Christian ways, and challenge us how to think of this foundational relationship within human society in the light of God’s word.

In a lengthy section of his first epistle (vv. 2:13-3:7), Peter is addressing specific societal relationships held in common by Christians and non-Christians—elements of the unwritten but widely accepted “household code” which defined many of the social relationships within Greco-Roman society. These relationships include the authority of civil government, the relationship between slaves and masters, and the relationship between husbands and wives. All of these fall under the heading of what we now call natural law. Although Christians and non-Christians both value these social institutions, God has spoken about these same relationships in his word, and so Peter is writing to do two things: 1) To remind his hearers that Christians do indeed regard these relationships as the foundation of society just as do Greco-Roman pagans, and 2). To correct whatever misconceptions his Christians readers/hearers may have regarding these relationships in light of God’s word.

When we study a letter such as 1 Peter which is filled with imperatives and commands, we must remind ourselves that these imperatives are given to Christian believers whom God has caused to be born again and who already have been set apart (sanctified) by God through the sprinkled blood of Jesus to live lives of holiness before the Lord. The imperatives of 1 Peter are given to Christian believers so as to identify themselves as citizens of a heavenly kingdom who look forward to a heavenly inheritance even while they dwell in the civil (or common) kingdom. Christians distinguish themselves from non-Christians through our doctrine (our profession of faith in the triune God who sent his son to save us from our sins) and in how we live our lives—we fix our hope upon Jesus, we live holy lives which reflect the holiness of our creator and redeemer, and we live in the fear of the Lord, because the one we invoke as our Father is also judge of all the earth.

In the first half of chapter 2, Peter exhorts his readers to keep their conduct honorable before the Gentiles who are persecuting them, so that those who speak evil of God’s people will be silenced and forced to give glory to God on the day of judgment. Christians must realize that the pagans who distrust them are watching how Christians conduct themselves. Peter is concerned for church’s witness to the saving work of Jesus Christ, as well as with discrediting those false accusations pagans were making against Christians—i.e., that Christians reject all civil authority because they do not worship Caesar.

In the last half of chapter 2 (vv. 13-17), Peter instructs the elect exiles to whom he is writing to submit to the civil magistrate who persecutes and oppresses them, while in vv. 18-25, Peter instructs Christian who are slaves and servants, to likewise respond to their masters with proper submission. Peter directs all oppressed and persecuted believers to keep the example of Jesus before their eyes, who, Peter reminds them, suffered on behalf of his people as the perfect sufferer, whose life and death secures the salvation of God's people, and earns for them a heavenly inheritance beyond all human imagining.

As we move into the first seven verses of chapter 3, Peter addresses yet another element of the Greco-Roman household code, this time the relationship between husbands and wives. As in our earlier discussion of both civil government and slavery, some historical background here is essential if we are to make sense of Peter's discussion, and then draw appropriate application to our own situation. Peter has been concentrating on those circumstances under which Christians have little power, and in which they can face especially cruel and harsh treatment from unbelievers.<sup>1</sup> All of Peter's readers face persecution from a hostile Roman government, but are to submit to the governing authorities except in those circumstances where Caesar commands that Christians violate God's will—under such circumstances Christians are to obey God rather than men, even if Christians must take their lumps for doing so.

Some of Peter's readers are servants or slaves—a large social class (or caste) of former prisoners of war or their descendants bound to serve all kinds of masters (some cruel, some kind and generous) under all kinds of circumstances (from forced labor to education of the household's children). Peter tells the servants in his audience to submit to their masters just as Jesus submitted to those who abused him and put him to death. This not only bears witness to pagans about the truth of the gospel (Christ's sinless life and sacrificial death), but gives the cruel master no reason to abuse his Christian servants.

When we come to chapter 3, Peter's focus shifts to yet another social group which figures prominently in the household code—husbands and wives, including wives with unbelieving husbands. In the Greco-Roman world of Peter's day, wives had few legal rights and were considered the property of their husbands, much as slaves and servants were viewed as property of their masters. Just as slaves were to submit to their masters even when their masters were cruel, so too, Christian wives are to submit to their husbands, even if they are unbelievers. Peter urges such submission on two familiar grounds: to be a witness to the saving merits of Jesus, and so as to not give cruel husbands a reason to abuse their wives.

Since the Greeks and Romans viewed wives as property of their husbands who could do whatever they wished to them, Peter is writing, in part, to correct this erroneous notion by making sure (in v. 7) that Christian husbands treat their wives with appropriate honor, and show them the respect due them as fellow believers and co-heirs in Christ. In contrast to the low-standing of wives (and of women in general) in the Greco-Roman household codes, the Scriptures are clear that wives are divine image-bearers as are their husbands (Genesis 1:26), that Christian husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25), that a wife even has authority over her husband's body (1 Corinthians 7:3-4), meaning that a husband is bound to be faithful to his wife and have no other sexual partners.

In this sense, Christianity is thoroughly counter-cultural and challenges the Greco-Roman household code at a number of fundamental points. There can be no question that it is Christianity has done the most to advance the rights and equality of women throughout the history of Western Civilization. When

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), Logos Bible Software, on 3:1.

we view the New Testament as a whole, women are given equal status with men before Christ (Galatians 3:28), and because they excel at prayer, mercy, and charity, they are to use these gifts in the church for the common good. Nevertheless, the New Testament is also clear that the offices of minister, elder, and deacon (through which Christ rules his church) are limited to men, and that Christian wives are to submit to Christian husbands in those matters related to spiritual things within the home—unless through unrepentant sin and abusive conduct the husband disqualifies himself as one worthy of such submission.

Peter is writing to first-century people living under a Greco-Roman household code derived from natural law but which has been corrupted to a large degree by sin. Peter's readers have never once entertained the thought of an egalitarian view of gender roles as we find them in the modern world, and they could not even conceive of women as emancipated individuals with the same societal rights as men—as our culture does. The influence of Christianity across the centuries enables us to take for granted what was not even on Peter's radar. The Apostle is writing to first century Christian wives facing a situation quite common in the Mediterranean world in which Christianity was spreading rapidly—what does a wife do when she becomes a Christian, and her husband does not? If she is now bound to Christ (as his servant) is she then free to ignore her obligations as a wife because she has a pagan husband? Peter's answer is “no.” How does she now relate to the household code of that day which grants her few if any rights, and in which she is expected to submit to her husband no matter pagan or cruel he may be. Peter tells her.

In verses 1-2 of chapter 3, Peter writes, “*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.*” The same principle applies here as it did in relationship to an anti-Christian government and to a cruel master abusing his servants. Wives are to be subject to their husbands—even non-Christian husbands—in order that their conduct honor Christ (in the case of believers) and will point their unbelieving husbands (should they have one) to the saving work of Jesus.

One commentator puts the matter this way. “Peter engaged in a play on words, saying that those who are disobeying ‘the word’ (*logos*) may be converted ‘without words’ (lit., ‘without a word,’ *aneu logou*) by their wives’ behavior.” The writer goes on to say, “by ‘without a word’ meant wives should refrain from badgering their husbands about their need for conversion. The spoken words of wives had not had an effect, and so they were called upon to live out the gospel before their husbands. The primary influence on husbands will not be the speech of wives but their godly behavior.”<sup>2</sup> In the case where a Christian wife has told her husband about Jesus and the gospel, and he does not convert, Peter says, the wife is not to continually nag her husband, but live out the kind of humility Peter is describing (imitating the life of Jesus) which removes or deflates his objections, and reduces his cruel behavior (should there be any).

The application is simple. In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul instructs that Christians not marry non-Christians. If you are single, do not do marry a non-Christian. If you are already married to a non-Christian, Peter instructs you to be the best spouse you can be, to honor your unbelieving spouse, and to show them love and respect. Share Christ with them when you can, and if they are not interested, let them witness *your respectful and pure conduct*. By the grace of God, you may see them come to faith in Jesus Christ!

As for submission to a cruel husband, our situation is much different from the one Peter describes. In the first century, a wife who was abused by her husband had no legal recourse because such behavior was

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<sup>2</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos Bible Software, on 3:1.

not a violation of Roman law (a crime). In our culture, domestic violence (as defined by the penal code) is not only a sin which requires confession and repentance, it is considered a crime, and the abuser may be subject to arrest, and prosecution. The Greco-Roman household code allowed men to abuse and dominate their wives. Neither the Bible (given its view of woman and the way their husbands should treat them with love, honor, and respect) nor modern penal codes allow or condone physical violence, threats or intimidation, nor intense or prolonged verbal abuse. A Christian spouse need never suffer such abusive or violent treatment. If it happens, report it to a trusted friend, elder, or pastor, or the police (if the threat is serious enough).

In verses 3-4, Peter addresses the matter of modesty and beauty. *“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.”* Peter’s words are almost identical to Paul’s in 1 Timothy 2:9–10. There Paul writes, *“likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works.”* These words require a bit of explanation.

The Greco-Roman household code insisted upon women covering their hair (an object of male lust), and even their faces with veils. The Islamic use of the hijab (the woman’s head-covering) is a hold-over from this ancient practice. Women of the Roman world (Jews, Romans, and Greeks) were not to dress provocatively (so as to look like men,), nor were they to dress seductively in public to attract the attention of men who were not their husbands. The ancients knew what we know; women have the power to drive men crazy by what they wear, or do not wear, as the case may be. Women were to keep themselves covered in the presence of men, because this was thought to be the way in which male lust was kept under control.

The rationale, in part, for this stress on external modesty is that the Greco-Roman world was filled with temple prostitutes, who, through sexual relations, unite their patrons to the particular deity which the prostitute served. These women dressed the part—as immodest as you can get. Their services extended far beyond sexual sin into the realm of paganism, because the participant’s bodies were offered to the “gods” to procure increased fertility, or to gain material blessing. It was also thought that sexual relations with a temple prostitute could stave off bad weather, natural disasters, or even war—or at least that was the excuse men gave to allow such prostitution in virtually every city in the Roman empire.

In the Greco-Roman world, one’s social standing determined how women dressed. With the poorer classes, modesty was tied to a woman’s clothing—the more clothing the better—to distinguish themselves from prostitutes. Wealthy women, on the other hand, went to great lengths to demonstrate their higher social standing by adorning their hair with braids, and by wearing their expensive jewels and bangles in public. In some instances, wealth and high social standing provided an excuse and an opportunity to ignore the household code. Given the biblical teaching about human sinfulness Christians understood that wearing modest clothing cannot deal with the sinful human heart. Nor does adorning oneself with expensive jewels make a woman beautiful. This is where the Greco-Roman household code failed—it could stop lust and sexual sin, and it divided people into classes, with poorer women either envying or resenting those who wore the hairstyles and jewels of the wealthy (flaunting the code), or in wealthy women seeking to impress one another through ignoring the code’s insistence upon modest dress.

Peter’s response is that Christians have a different standard of modesty and beauty altogether. True modesty and beauty before God do not come about because a woman avoids looking like a prostitute by

covering herself from head to toe with a burka—besides men will spend all day try to imagine what is hidden underneath. On the flip side, adorning oneself with tokens of wealth and high social standing (fashion) does not make a woman beautiful. Donald Gray Barnhouse—pastor of the famed 10<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia—made this point quite well describing how a scantily clad woman could be rescued from a burning building in the middle of the night and be perfectly modest, while another woman—to use his terms—could be at a dinner party wearing five dresses and five mink stoles and be positively immodest. It is not the external appearance Peter is addressing, but the attitude of heart.

There is nothing wrong with being fashionable, or having a trendy hairdo or clothing, or with wearing fine jewelry. Peter is not saying frumpiness is next to godliness. But external adorning is a cultural thing, and it varies from place to place, culture to culture. What one culture considers a sign of beauty, another sees as unacceptable. What one culture considers to be modest is typical of clothing worn by prostitutes in another. This should be a caution to all of us about the foolishness of forming our personal identities, setting life-goals, and forming our self image in light of “external adorning,” or through external modesty. Peter is simply saying that Christian women should not view their sense of fashion as a means to show off their wealth, call undo attention to themselves in a narcissistic way (which is the fashion standard in American culture), or to encourage stares from men.

Peter tells Christian wives that true beauty is something which is internal—it is not external, nor is it tied to hairstyles or fashion. Modesty is an attitude of the heart, and true beauty is inward and found in *the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious*. Beauty, in God’s sight, is found in a willingness to follow the example of Jesus (in his quiet humility) and to be subject to your husband in those areas where God has established male headship in the home.

Peter appeals to redemptive history to illustrate his point. Alluding to Genesis 18 and the account of Sarah and Abraham (which we read as our Old Testament lesson), in verses 5-6, Peter points out, “*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.*” In Isaiah 51:2, both Abraham and Sarah are said to be father and mother (in a spiritual sense) of all faithful Israelites. “*Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him.*”

In the Genesis account, Sarah adorned herself with true beauty through her submission to her husband, even calling him her lord, when she made an offhand comment about becoming pregnant even though she was post-menopausal. Abraham too was an old man, and Sarah could have laughed at his claims that they would together produce an heir. But she does not mock her husband, and through her hope in God’s promise, Sarah becomes the spiritual mother of all those who likewise imitate her example—even of those Gentile women reading Peter’s letter, since through faith in Jesus Christ they are now citizens of the New Israel. As her spiritual children, Christian wives are to follow her example, do good to their husbands, knowing that God will reward and bless all those who put their trust in him.<sup>3</sup>

When Peter speaks of things which are frightening, I think it safe to assume that Peter is speaking about those situations in which Christian wives of unbelieving husbands will be called upon to obey God rather than their husbands. Like Sarah, women in such a difficult situation are to look beyond their current circumstances—which seem impossible—and to trust that God will some how and in some way vindicate

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<sup>3</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos Bible Software, on 3:5.

them, just as God fulfilled his promise to Abraham to produce an heir through Sarah his wife.

In verse 7, Peter turns his attention to Christian husbands, despite his earlier focus upon those who found themselves likely to be oppressed by others—Christian citizens in the Roman empire, servants by cruel masters, and Christian wives with unbelieving husbands. What Peter commands of husbands was absolutely revolutionary in the Greco-Roman world. *“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.”*

Having defined true beauty as a matter of the heart—in contrast to the false notion of beauty and modesty as mere external matters of dress and appearance—Peter now addresses a factual matter which many in our culture refuse to accept even though it is fully apparent every time we look at ourselves in the mirror. Men and women are biologically and emotionally different. The difference is not a matter of equality before God—men and women “are both heirs of the grace of life”—but of biology. Peter commands Christian husbands (yet another imperative), to reject one of the most fundamental elements of the Greco-Roman household code—that a man can do whatever he wants with his wife because he is physically stronger, and therefore thought by the ancients to be superior.

The fact of the matter is that men are stronger physically than our wives (in most cases)—and women are weaker vessels (physically) than their husbands. A man can physically intimidate his wife because he is stronger. Under the household code, wives could be beaten by their husbands. No one called the cops, no one told the husband to stop, or that it was wrong to do so. Peter, however, tells Christian husbands in no uncertain terms that this is completely unacceptable. It is because our wives are physically weaker, and because they are joint heirs with Christ, that Christians husbands are to treat wives with understanding. This “understanding” is the “knowledge” of God’s will regarding how Christian husbands are to treat their wives. Christian husbands are to show their wives respect (honor) and to realize that even though our wives are physically weaker, they are not in any sense inferior.

In fact, wives are (as are all Christian women) heirs with their husbands (and Christian men) of the grace of life—eternal life and our heavenly inheritance. Peter warns that those Christian men who do not honor their wives and who do not treat them as equals before the Lord, risk having their prayers “hindered.” Selfish and sinful behavior is always an impediment to prayer, but to seek to exploit the weakness of our spouses is not only sinful, it drives that one human being closest to us (our spouse) away, and the husband’s actions exasperates his wife, making it difficult for her to submit his headship. An abusive, tyrannical, or cruel husband creates a climate in which both husband and wife sin against each another.

As Charles Cranfield points out, one vital thing to notice in this passage is that Peter is speaking of the *duties* of husbands and wives, not the *rights* of husbands and wives as our culture tends to do. Both wives (vv. 1-6) and husbands (v. 7) are told what they ought do for the other, not to what each is entitled to receive from the other.<sup>4</sup> Peter’s exhortation speaks volumes to those of us in the modern world who are preoccupied with what we get out of a relationship, rather than with what we contribute to the well-being of our spouses. Life is not always about me. Peter directs us to focus upon the well-being of our spouse, and not worry about those “rights” to which we think we are entitled. To put the interests of others first, is to imitate Jesus—the suffering servant—who gave himself to save us from our sins.

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<sup>4</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, The Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press 1960), 92.

Upon hearing Peter's exhortations, there will be those among us who feel as though the Apostles words condemn us because we are guilty of doing all the things Peter has told us not to do. Remember that Peter is talking to people already set apart by God and sprinkled with the blood of Jesus—that blood which avails for us for all of the sins we have committed, even toward our spouses. These exhortations from the Apostle are given to correct non-Christian ways of thinking and doing, so as to help us be better witnesses to gospel of Jesus Christ to unbelievers around us, and to lessen their anger toward Christians.

One of the places we must challenge the unbelief around us is by reminding ourselves that God's standards of conduct are often not those of modern America. Despite everything our culture tells us, a woman's beauty is not external, it is inward—the beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. A man's greater strength is not a sign of superiority, but carries with it the duty of loving and honoring our wives, seeing in them a weaker vessel for whom we are to provide, and of whom we are to love and protect. In doing these things we not only honor our spouses, we honor the Savior who gave himself for us for all of those times we have failed to do these very things.