

Wives and Husbands

Series: Strangers and Neighbours: Learning to Be Christian in a Post Christian World from 1 Peter

Date: 4 September 2022, 12th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: 1 Peter 3:1-7; Mark 10:42-45; Genesis 18:1-15

We've been working our way through 1 Peter. It's a letter from the apostle Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, to Christians scattered throughout what is today Turkey. He was teaching them how to be Christians in the midst of a society that was indifferent or even hostile to the Christian faith. We're studying the book to help us learn how to be Christians in a post Christian society. Today we come to the part of the letter that is perhaps most at odds with contemporary Australian society, namely Peter's instruction: "wives ... submit to your own husbands."¹ On our church facebook group I asked earlier this week what questions you'd like me to answer that arise from this text. Some of the things people raised were: What about men in the church using texts like this to justify domestic violence? What about living with a controlling husband? In Galatians 3.28 Paul writes:

"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

What difference does that make to how we understand a text like this? Peter also commands slaves to submit to their masters. We can imagine how that might have worked in the 1st century, but it certainly doesn't apply today. Is it the same with this instruction for wives to submit to their husbands?

These are big questions and I'll try and address them, no doubt inadequately. It's with fear and trembling that I approach this sermon. I'm particularly conscious of women who have or do live with abusive partners and how texts like this can be weaponised. Just the mention of the word submission might make you want to switch off. Please, stay with us! At the outset let me say that that is a gross distortion of a text that should actually teach men to be gentle and considerate of their wives and treat them with dignity and respect. Texts like this have been used to argue that a particular stereotype of gender roles is what Christian marriages must look like, and I'll come to why this is a problem. We can be tempted to put a text like this in the too hard basket, but that leaves these really important questions unanswered, and erodes our trust in the Bible and God himself. CS Lewis writes,

If [Christianity] is something objective, then we must never avert our eyes from those elements in it which seem puzzling or repellent; for it will be precisely the puzzling or the repellent which conceals what we do not yet know and need to know.²

Let's map out where we're going. First we'll look at 3 strategies for interpreting this text. Second we'll look at the two controversial bits - wives submitting to husbands and wives as the "weaker partner". Along the way we'll look at what this text has to say to husbands and wives today. We need to pay close

¹ 1 Peter 3.1

² The Weight of Glory—a sermon given by CS Lewis in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, 1941.

attention to what this text does and doesn't say, and that will mean putting our thinking caps on. So strap in. Open your Bibles. And let's have a look at God's word together.

1. Three Interpretive strategies for the NT on marriage

Broadly speaking there are 3 ways people interpret the New Testament instructions to husbands and wives that we read in Ephesians and Colossians from the apostle Paul and here in 1 Peter.

1. *Peter and Paul were wrong.*

Just like the Bible was wrong on slavery, so it's wrong here too. The problem with this view is how do you choose which bit of the Bible is right and which is wrong? Invariably you choose by your own standards. Where do you get these from? The culture around you. But this raises a question. How can your standards be critiqued if they are the standard by which you judge everything else? Isn't that a position of cultural superiority? And what if you're wrong, maybe not on this but on something else? How can you ever know? And further, how can you get real justice if you and your culture can only ever be right? On this approach you'll never be called to repent. Which is to say you'll never grow. Simply saying the Bible is wrong is a dead end. It sets your own opinion and your own culture in judgement over the Bible. And if God cannot disagree with you, then is he really God? There are 2 other interpretive approaches that seek to be faithful to the Biblical material on this question. Scholars are divided and there are lots of disagreements within the church over them. I'm going to lay them out, and tell you where I'm up to in my reading of the texts. I don't claim that this is the final word, and this is certainly an area where we need to hold this disagreement in charity.

1.1.i Slavery

Just as an aside. Yes, the Bible doesn't explicitly condemn slavery. However it does condemn kidnapping people to sell them as slaves and slave trading.³ And the doctrine that all people are made in the image of God, that Christ died for all, and that we are brothers and sister in Christ, regardless of social status - these truths refuted the internal logic of slavery and were a time bomb that eventually exploded the system.

2. *The New Testament instructions to husbands and wives is an accommodation to culture*

Galatians 3:28 is the paradigm - "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The fundamental spiritual equality between men and women, suggests that there should be no difference in their roles in marriage. On this account, the NT writers are concerned about either maintaining social order within the church; or living at peace with surrounding culture so as to avoid persecution; Or they want to commend the gospel to the surrounding culture. Peter's instructions are an example of this. He is speaking to Christian women who are married to pagan husbands. What is the reason he tells them to submit to their husbands? 3.1 "So that if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives." This approach alerts

³ Exodus 21.16, 1 Timothy 1.10

us to the cultural factors at play in the text. And we would be well to consider the cultural lens through which we read as well.

Just as an aside, I have some friends for whom this verse fits their story. The wife was a Christian, her husband was not. At first she tried talking him into the kingdom. But then, after clear direction from God, she just got on with living a faithful Christian life and praying for him. One day years later he said to her that he needed to go to church, and in time came to faith. With our family who see us close up, our lives are the greatest witness.

3. *The instructions to husbands and wives are grounded in creation and redemption*

This is Paul's argument in Ephesians 5, where Paul says, "Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. ... Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church..."⁴ And, quoting the creation account, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery, but I'm talking about Christ and the church."⁵ Here Paul is speaking to Christian husbands and wives. On this account there is an asymmetrical relationship between husbands and wives. Their roles are not interchangeable.

Peter and Paul both say wives are to submit to their husbands. But they give different reasons. Peter seems to advocate Christian wives act towards their husbands in a way that is acceptable to the prevailing social structure, and yet at the same time radically changes the basis for their behaviour. It is now no longer to be because of social convention and contemporary philosophy - which are in Peter's eyes, the empty way of life handed down from your ancestors. Now it is to be an expression of freedom in Christ (2.16), out of reverent fear of God (2.18), and in order to commend Christ (3.1).

2. "Submission" and the "weaker vessel"

Having sketched the 3 interpretive strategies, let's have a look at the 2 things in 1 Peter 3.1-7 that are most problematic for our culture. "Wives submit to your own husbands," verse 1, and that wives are "the weaker partner", verse 7. We'll take them in reverse order.

2.(a) *The weaker partner*

I have to say that there have been some downright misogynistic readings of this phrase through the history of interpretation, suggesting that women are somehow intellectually, morally, or spiritually inferior to men. Such readings go against the text itself which addresses women as capable moral agents, something which was counter cultural in the 1st century. Women are also addressed in the very next phrase as spiritual equals to their husbands, "heirs with you of the gracious gift of life." No, the clue to the meaning of this phrase is in the Greek word translated "partner" or in older translations "vessel". It's a metaphor for the body. I'm convinced this is just an acknowledgement of

⁴ Ephesians 5.22-23, 25

⁵ Ephesians 5.31-32

the created reality that women are, in general, physically weaker than men. That's not always the case, but that doesn't invalidate the generalisation. We live in a time and place where feminism has made great gains such this difference in strength doesn't govern social relations between men and women. I'm thankful for these. But this can make us pretend that the physical differences between men and women are trivial. In an article called, 'I'm 30. The Sexual Revolution has Shackled My Generation', secular feminist Louise Perry writes,

“The problem is the differences *aren't* trivial. Sexual asymmetry is profoundly important: One half of the population is smaller and weaker than the other half, making it much more vulnerable to violence. This half of the population also carries all of the risks associated with pregnancy.”⁶

The history of the world has been one where men so often use their strength in selfish and domineering ways, at the expense of women. This I think is what the curse in Genesis 3.16 predicted long ago when it said “Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.”

Strength or Power however is not necessarily a bad thing. It can, and should be used for good. How does Jesus say power should be used? In humble service. For the sake of those without power. Mark 10.42-45

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **43** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. **45** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Peter's instructions flow from this. Husbands, you are in a position of power by virtue of your strength. How are you to use this power? Like Christ uses his. What does Peter say? By being considerate of your wives. Considering your wives. Treating them with respect. Making space for them. Listening to them. Valuing and honouring them. As the stronger partner, using your strength in humble and gentle service. In contrast to our culture, this is not toxic masculinity demanding sex on tap. This goes beyond consent. This is men disciplining their sexuality to serve their wives. Paul says in Colossians, “husbands, love your wives, and don't be harsh with them.” Why? Because that can be the temptation. In Ephesians he says, loving them as you love your own body, feeding it, taking care of it. Indeed, it's loving your wife like Christ loves the church, giving yourself up for her, dying to yourself daily, so that she might live. Isn't this how we want men to use their strength?

Husbands, there is no way that Peter or Paul's words here can be read to justify controlling or intimidating or physically or emotionally abusing your wives. To do so is a gross and sinful distortion of God's word that has no place in the Christian life.

⁶ Louise Perry, 'I'm 30. The Sexual Revolution has Shackled my Generation.' *Common Sense*, 20.8.22, https://www.commonsense.news/p/im-30-the-sexual-revolution-shackled?utm_source=email&triedSigningIn=true

Likewise, nowhere in Scripture does it say that husbands must demand submission or try to make wives submit. Your business is to love your wife like Christ loves the church. In fact, what does Peter say? You be considerate and respect your wife, treating her as your spiritual equal, “So that nothing will hinder your prayers”. You fail in that, then there is a barrier between you and God, not to mention a problem in your marriage. Your spiritual health, and the spiritual health of your wife and family depend upon how you treat your wife.

2. (b) Submission

Equality is one of our highest values in Australia. We’re suspicious of authority and power. We don’t like the idea of submission and especially if someone tells us we have to. And yet, you pay your taxes, stop at the red light, do the job your boss gives you, obey the laws of the land, you listen to your teacher. These are all submitting. And we recognise they are for our good and the good of society. The Bible tells us to submit to God, to governments, children to parents, church members to elders in the church. Christ himself submits to God the Father (1 Corinthians 15.28). Submission here is a good response to an authority under which we find ourselves, where that authority acts for our good. It literally means “to order under”. Not all submission looks the same. In each of those cases submission looks different. But basically, within the limits of the relationship, it’s doing what the authority wants. While God is always good, we are still called to submit those different authorities, even when they are not good, but with discernment, entrusting ourselves to God, even as Christ did. Sometimes that means we may suffer unjustly. That’s Peter’s instruction to slaves.

What about wives? There are other texts when it comes to justifications for leaving a marriage - adultery, desertion, and abuse.⁷ If you find yourself in that situation you are free to leave. Those cases aside, what does 1 Peter say about wives and submission? Marriage is different from all other relationships. Paul frames his instructions to husbands and wives within the context of mutual submission.⁸ Marriage is unity in difference. Men and women are physiologically different. This is simply a fact of our created bodies, which should be received with thanksgiving. This is why the marriage relationship is not symmetrical. If the husband is called to use his strength to love and serve his wife, putting her well-being above his own at every point, She is called to receive and celebrate her husband’s use of that strength on her behalf, cooperating with him and encouraging him. That is submission.

While Peter uses the word obedience as a synonym, Paul lands on the word respect. If we fixate on obedience, this can limit our moral imagination as to what submission might look like. One commentator writes, “When “submission” of the wife becomes the central issue, the Christian marriage has already been distorted.”⁹

What then does submission look like?

⁷ Matthew 19.1-9; 1 Corinthians 7.10-16; Exodus 21.10-11.

⁸ Ephesians 5.21

⁹ Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker, 2005: 210

I think it's significant that Peter doesn't really give much detail. There is purity and reverence (3.2), but these are elsewhere commanded to all Christians. There is the inward and unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, contrasted with ostentatious outwards adornment (3.3-4).

While we might bristle over this critique of "outward adornment", I cannot help thinking that this is a timely word for an Instagram obsessed age. It's not that natural beauty is bad. But it doesn't last. And it's an accident of your birth. A beautiful character is something you can cultivate and that will only get better with age!

What about the example of **Sarah**, who "obeyed Abraham and called him lord" (3.5-6)?

It's an obscure reference. She calls Abraham lord when she has that despairing chuckle at the impossibility of having a child. She submits in situations that are morally ambiguous. When Abraham asks her to pretend to be his sister out of fear that Pharaoh will kill him because she's so beautiful. At other times Abraham "obeys" her, and in fact God commands Abraham to do what Sarah says (Genesis 21.12). Sarah's example indicates that submission does not mean obedience in any and every circumstance.

Peter also mentions the holy women who put their hope in God, and says that wives should do what is right and not give way to fear. What does he mean here? It can be easy to put your hope in a man, and then to be captive to fear when that man turns out to be a tyrant. Peter says, no, remember the living hope you have through the resurrection of Christ. You may be in a powerless position now, but he will one day judge justly. You can entrust yourself to him. You need not repay evil for evil. Your man does not define who you are or how you act. Jesus does. And in him you are free. So you can, with discernment, in the limitations of your circumstances submit to your husband.

All verses 1-6 seem to say about submission is purity, reverence, hope in God, doing what is right, and, on occasion, with discernment, going along with your husband's plan even if it seems a little dubious. Or as Paul puts it, respecting your husband. Contempt, resentment, nagging, manipulation these are the opposite of submission. But is that it? Surely you can give some more direction on what submission looks like?

On the conservative side of things there has been a lot of absolutising gender stereotypes and saying this is what marriages must look like. This is simply not biblical and it's often caused lots of problems. The 1950s nuclear family is not a Biblical ideal! There is no rule in the Bible that says men have to go out to work, control finances and women have to stay home, cook and clean. But neither Peter nor Paul are prescriptive. It's really between husband and wife to work out the dynamics of their relationship with their own personalities, circumstances and abilities. Submission and love are, I suggest, the God-given remedies for the conflict and competition unleashed by the fall that can plague marriages. What submission looks like is different in different cultures

We've covered a lot of ground. Let me summarise. Peter highlights the reality that men are physically stronger than women. What are husbands to do with that power? Love and serve their wives with

humility and gentleness. Submission for wives is about respecting your husband and receiving his love and service. This will look different in every marriage.

Let me finish with a final question. You might have noticed that Peter begins his instructions to both wives and husbands with the words “in the same way” (3.1, 7). Why? This refers back to the “in the reverent fear of God” in 2.18, and the “show proper respect to everyone” in 2.17, and to the living good lives among the pagans in 2.12. That is to say, we’re to conduct ourselves in marriage in a way that pleases God. In a world marked by competition and conflict, where people use and abuse each other in relationships, in God’s mercy, our marriages can be something good that commend Christ to the watching world.