

**“SERVANTS IN MARRIAGE”**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

You will have noticed that Peter’s instructions to both wives and husbands in these verses begin with the same word: the “Likewise,” which appears in verses 1 and 7. This term refers back to the statement in chapter 2:13 that introduced this portion of the letter: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.” In the passages that precede our text, Peter showed how Christians should conduct themselves in relation to the institutions of civil government and slavery. In this passage, he shows how we should conduct ourselves in the institution of marriage. The Bible’s teaching about marriage should be of great interest to all Christians regardless of whether they themselves are married, because marriage is the fundamental social unit of both society in general and of the church in particular. In the words of Thomas Gataker, “the society of man and wife [is] the main root, source, and original of all other societies.” (cited in J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 262) While it is true that some of God’s people are called to serve him in a life of celibacy, many more are called to marriage. And Christian marriage involves great privileges and responsibilities, which are summed up in these words from Richard Baxter: “It is a mercy to have a faithful friend that loveth you entirely...to whom you may open your mind and communicate your affairs...and it is a mercy to have so near a friend to be a helper to your soul and...to stir up in you the grace of God.” (cited in

Packer, 262) Such is God's purpose for the union of a man and a woman in holy matrimony. In this passage, Peter teaches us that the relationship between husband and wife should be one of mutual respect and self-giving service. While each has a unique role in the marriage relationship, each is called to serve the other, and in so doing serve the Lord, in their respective roles.

## **II. INSTRUCTIONS TO WIVES**

Our passage begins with specific instructions for wives, and the first thing that Peter has to say to wives sounds very offensive to the modern ear: be subject to your husbands. A wife is under the authority of her husband. This teaching was accepted without protest for the first nineteen centuries of church history, but in the twentieth century the rise of Feminism has caused some to call it into question. It is this teaching that causes the Feminist to charge Christianity with sexism. Here is a perfect example, they say, of how the church has always tried to keep women down. Now, we have to be honest: there have been, and there still are, men within the church who treat their wives like dirt. This is an irrefutable fact, and it is to our great shame. However, such men really have no business calling themselves followers of Jesus Christ, the One who loved the church as his bride and laid down his life for her. Furthermore, it is not only inside the church that we find examples of men who treat women poorly. There are a great many men in our world, a world, by the way, that is steeped in Feminist ideals, who seek to use women

only to satisfy their own selfish desires. Feminism has done nothing to protect women from such men. In fact, there are many ways in which it has made women even more vulnerable to them. By way of contrast, the role offered to a woman in traditional marriage actually provides her with a great deal of security and protection.

Our passage also addresses those Christian women who, for one reason or another, are married to men who are not living in obedience to God's Word, women who are married to non-Christian men. There have been many such women throughout the history of the church. There are women in such marriages within our own congregation. And the very fact that this situation exists serves as proof that the Christian faith views men and women as spiritual equals, even though it assigns them different roles in the marital relationship. This was especially evident in the first century context in which Peter was writing. At that time, a woman was expected to follow the religion of her husband. But in spite of this, there were a number of married women in the early church who had converted to Christianity on their own, without their husbands leading the way. This shows that the church has always viewed women as responsible moral agents in themselves. A married women can and should place her faith in Christ, even when her husband does not.

Of course, this results in a situation that is less than ideal. God ordained marriage in order that a husband and wife could be of mutual help to each other in every sphere of

life, especially in the spiritual sphere. But mutual spiritual help is not possible when one spouse is a Christian and the other is a non-Christian. This is why the Bible is so clear in teaching that a Christian should only seek to marry another Christian. Nevertheless, the Bible also recognizes that there are situations in which a Christian is married to a non-Christian. And for this reason, Peter instructs Christian wives to try to win their unbelieving husbands to Christ by their example. Even when a man is so resistant to the gospel that he is unwilling to hear it, a Christian wife can bear witness to the gospel by her conduct. We find a wonderful example of this in Monica, the mother of Augustine, whom he described to God with these words:

“She served her husband as master, and she did all she could to win him for You, speaking to him of You by her conduct, by which You made her beautiful... Finally, when her husband was at the end of his earthly span, she gained him for You.” (*Confessions*, 9:19-22)

A Christian woman married to a non-Christian man is in a unique situation, and she should never lose heart. Who knows what the Lord will do? Let us all remember to pray faithfully for the unbelieving husbands who are connected to our church. And let us encourage and pray for the women in such marriages, that they might serve their Lord by setting a godly example before their husbands.

Peter also instructs wives concerning the importance of focusing upon the cultivation of the kind of beauty that matters most to God. Now Peter is not saying that physical beauty is utterly unimportant and inconsequential, and that therefore a woman should utterly neglect her appearance. The Bible actually has some good things to say about outward beauty, as we see in the Song of Songs. But Peter is calling attention to the fact that outward beauty, as wonderful as it is, is only temporary. And for this reason, it should be a relatively minor concern to a woman of God. Instead of spending the bulk of her time and energy on her hairstyle, or clothing, or fashion accessories, let her focus on the cultivation of godliness. Admittedly, this is a great challenge for women in most cultures, and it is especially challenging in our culture: a culture in which we are continually bombarded with airbrushed images of ideal beauty; a culture that unashamedly encourages vanity and immodesty. I am reminded of a news article that I read several years back when I lived in Seattle. It was a story about a teenage girl who wrote a letter to Nordstrom department store, complaining about the utter lack of almost any modest apparel for a young woman in their store. This is the world in which we live. But regardless of the challenges any given culture may present, a Christian woman is called to resist the lies that the world tries to feed her about the essence of feminine beauty. She needs to always remember that the Lord views as precious that woman who displays the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. That is the kind of beauty that will never fade away.

### **III. INSTRUCTIONS TO HUSBANDS**

We turn now to the instructions that Peter directs towards husbands. He begins by calling husbands to live with their wives in an understanding way and to treat them with honor and respect. This gets at one of the great temptations that we husbands face: the temptation to grow frustrated with our wives because of the fact that they are women. It sounds silly, but you husbands know what I mean. And this is a temptation to which we must not yield. The Lord calls us to be understanding towards our wives. This is so vital for the marriage relationship. As John Calvin writes, “For nothing destroys the friendship of life more than contempt; nor can we really love any but those whom we esteem; for love must be connected with respect.” This respect extends to how a husband talks to his wife and to how he treats her. There is no place in a Christian marriage for verbal, emotional or physical abuse. Men, let us strive to honor our wives, following the example of our Lord, who is making his church into a holy and radiant bride.

You probably took note of how our text also refers to women as “the weaker vessel.” This is not in reference to a woman’s intellect or to her standing before God. Instead, it is simply a way of saying that, in general, women are more physically and emotionally vulnerable than men. In the ancient world and in our own egalitarian age, it is easy for men to mistreat and intimidate their wives, whether physically or emotionally. This is simply a fact of nature. It implies absolutely nothing about the value of women in

comparison to men. The fact that something is in some respects weaker than something else does not make it less valuable or less important. A crystal glass is a lot weaker than one of those water bottles you can buy at L.L. Bean, but the glass is a lot more valuable. Men and women are spiritually equal, a fact that is clearly implied in this passage when Peter refers to both husbands and wives as heirs of the grace of life. Men and women are different, but before God they are equal.

Finally, Peter also tells husbands that it is important that they respect their wives lest their prayers be hindered. There is a vital connection between our relationships with other people and our relationship with God, and this is especially true with respect to the marriage relationship. A man who harbors a contemptuous attitude towards his wife will not be able to have rich communion with God.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Men and women are different, and God calls them to different roles within the marriage relationship. But within those roles, there is a great deal of common ground. Fundamentally, both husbands and wives are called to serve the Lord by seeking each other's spiritual welfare. Listen to the way in which Richard Baxter summarizes the common duties of husbands and wives. It is a lengthy quote, but I want you to hear all of it:

“The common duty of husband and wife is,

1. Entirely to love each other; and therefore choose one that is truly lovely...;  
and avoid all things that tend to quench your love.
2. To dwell together, and enjoy each other, and faithfully join as helpers in the education of their children, the government of the family, and the management of their worldly business.
3. Especially to be helpers of each other’s salvation: to stir up each other to faith, love, and obedience, and good works: to warn and help each other against sin, and all temptations; to join in God’s worship in the family, and in private: to prepare each other for the approach of death, and comfort each other in the hopes of life eternal.
4. To avoid all dissensions, and to bear with those infirmities in each other which you cannot cure: to assuage, and not provoke, unruly passions; and, in lawful things, to please each other.
5. To keep conjugal chastity and fidelity, and to avoid all unseemly and immodest [conduct] with another, which may stir up jealousy; and yet to avoid all jealousy which is unjust.
6. To help one another to bear their burdens (and not by impatience to make them greater). In poverty, crosses, sickness, dangers, to comfort and support

**Sermon on 1 Peter 3:1-7**  
**OT Reading: Proverbs 31:10-31**

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each other. And to be delightful companions in holy love, and heavenly hopes and duties, when all other outward comforts fail.” (cited in Packer, p. 263)

This is what the Lord calls us to as husbands and wives. Let us all remember to pray for the marriages of this church. May our marriages truly be reflective of Christ’s relationship with his church, and may they produce fruit for his glory.