

Message #9

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1 Peter

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SUFFERING AND WIFELY SUBMISSION

1 PETER 3:1-6

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Perhaps the most crucial question facing evangelical Christians in the United States today is this: Is the Bible without error and completely trustworthy? If the Bible is something less than 100% correct and authoritative, then what it says about the most pressing issues of our day is something less than authoritative. One of these pressing issues is family life. What is God's plan for family life? Our focus this morning is the role of women in the family, in particular, the role of women in marriage.

The opinion makers of our culture have already decided that there should be little or no difference in the roles that men and women have in marriage because of their gender. In the last few years these opinion makers have gone a step further and decided that we humans can even choose our own gender identity. So not only are they denying what God's Word says about men and women and how God created us, but also they are saying that people can deny biological reality.

This thinking is having an impact upon the evangelical world. In 1987 a group of Christian leaders from around the country formed an organization which calls itself "Christians for Biblical Equality." This group includes a number of scholars from evangelical seminaries and colleges. As the name suggests, they are of the conviction that, other than child bearing, there should be no distinction between men and women in the roles that they have in the family, the church, and society based upon their gender.

In its statement of beliefs about men and women in marriage (PROJECTOR ON--- "IN THE CHRISTIAN...") Christians for Biblical Equality says, "**In the Christian home, husband and wife are to defer to each other...**" A bit later the statement (IN CASE OF DECISIONAL...) adds, "**In case of decisional deadlock, they should seek resolution through biblical methods of conflict resolution rather than by one spouse imposing a decision upon the other.**" It goes on to say (IN THE CHRISTIAN HOME SPOUSES...), "**In the Christian home spouses are to learn to share the responsibilities of leadership.**" (CBE International, Statement of Beliefs, Applications, #3 & 4) The basic claim that this group is making is that there should

be no differentiation of roles in the Christian home decided upon the basis of gender alone. The group is saying that the idea that wives should submit to their husbands because they are women and that husbands should lead because they are men is not right. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Faith Martin, a founding board member of Christians for Biblical Equality, writes in her book *Call Me Blessed*, “**For all its potency and long history as a reputable doctrine, the principle of male authority is elusive when one searches Scripture; in fact, it cannot be found there at all...**” The passage before us this morning seems to contradict that claim. We want to see what these verses have to tell us about God’s perspective on the husband-wife relationship.

We have seen from our study of 1 Peter thus far that the apostle was telling first century Christians how to handle trials, many of which were the result of persecution for their faith. Peter has told his Christian audience that they need to be holy in all of their behavior. He went on to describe what holy behavior means in the relationship of believers toward one another and toward unbelievers. A couple of weeks ago, Steve Tomlinson described what Peter says about holiness in the relationship that Christians should have toward government and toward employers. Now the Biblical text describes what holiness means in the relationship that Christian wives have toward their husbands. Next week we will see what the author has to say about the responsibility of husbands.

I.

Let’s look then at WIFELY SUBMISSION AND ITS PURPOSE (PROJECTOR ON--- WIFELY SUBMISSION...), as described in v. 1. 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...**”

A.

We are going to consider first THE BACKGROUND (I. WIFELY SUBMISSION... A. THE BACKGROUND) of this instruction from Peter about wifely submission. The ancient Greeks influenced the culture of the entire Roman Empire, including Asia Minor, which we know today as Turkey. It was to Christians in the northern part of this region to whom Peter was writing.

The Greeks had a low view of women. Aristotle once declared, “**By nature the male is superior, the female inferior; therefore the man rules and the woman is ruled.**” (*Politika* 1.2.12) Another Greek philosopher by the name of Demosthenes wrote in the fourth century BC, quoting a speaker in his story,

“We have prostitutes for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation, and wives to have legitimate children.” (*Against Neaira*, 122) Women were often treated as things.

When the Romans became the dominant world force, their view of women was influenced by the Greeks. They had a slightly better view of women. Some upper class women had considerable prestige and respect. Still they usually had little legal standing before the law. About the time that Peter was writing his letter, the Roman philosopher Seneca was saying, **“Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married.”** (Wm. Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit*, p. 24) In the eyes of Roman law women were treated as property.

The Jews had the highest view of women in that part of the ancient world. Jewish women had genuine legal rights. Some of those rights were based directly upon what the Old Testament said. Some were based upon Jewish custom and tradition. Jewish legal tradition, for example, said that a woman could not be given in marriage without her consent. A wife could not be forced to leave Jerusalem or Israel, to move from the city to the country, or vice versa, without her permission.

Actual practice did not always follow Jewish doctrine. In a place far away from Jerusalem, like Asia Minor, the Jews may have been influenced in the treatment of women by the surrounding culture, just like we are often more influenced by the surrounding culture than by the Bible.

Peter was writing to a mixed group of Christians comprised of Jews and Gentiles who were living in Asia Minor. Our passage implies that some of them were women who were married to non-Christians. Elsewhere the New Testament says that Christians should not marry non-Christians. (2 CORINTHIANS 6:14; also 1 Corinthians 7:39) Also the Apostle Paul says that if an unbelieving spouse leaves the family, the believer is no longer bound to that person. (1 CORINTHIANS 7:15) The situation here seems to be that a number of women had come to Christ after they were married, but their husbands remained unbelievers. That is common in our culture also.

The obvious questions that these women in the first century had were: What do I do now? How should I treat my husband? Should I leave him because he isn't a Christian--- though that was probably an option not available to many women? Some had difficult husbands who treated their Christian wives according to the prevailing cultural view of the day. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The underlying cultural expectation was that wives would honor their husbands' religious preferences. The Greek writer Plutarch described this expectation: **"A wife ought not to make friends on her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer and outlandish superstitions."** ("Advice to Bride and Groom, #19")

These unbelieving husbands figured out ways to harass their Christian wives over the years. A couple of centuries later the church leader Tertullian described some of the difficulties: **"If a station is to be made, her husband will arrange to meet her at the baths; if fasts are to be kept, her husband will be giving a feast the same day; if she has to go out, never will family business be more hindering; for who would allow his wife to go round the town to other people's houses and especially to all the poorer cottages for the sake of visiting the brethren? Who would willingly let her be taken from his side for meetings at night, if it should be her duty?"** (*Ad uxorem*, 2.4.f)

So how should a Christian wife deal with this? Peter provides an answer in v. 1: **"Likewise---** that is, just as Christians are to be subject to every human institution, according to #2 v. 13; just as Christians are to be subject to government, just as slaves are to be subject to masters--- **be subject to your own husbands..."**

The command to wives here involves the specific situation of having an unbelieving husband. Ephesians #5 v. 22 indicates that Christian women are also to have the same response to Christian husbands. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 5:22) There Paul writes, **"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord."** In Colossians #3 the apostle says a similar thing (COLOSSIANS 3:18): **"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."**

B.

Let's consider then for a moment WHAT PETER'S COMMAND IS NOT. (I. A. B. WHAT IT IS NOT) To understand what this command does mean, it may be helpful to consider what it does not mean. It does not mean that Christian women are responsible to submit to all men, even Christian men. It does not mean that women should not serve in supervisory positions in the workplace. It does not mean that wives are to be passive doormats.

It also does not mean that women are inferior to men. Men and women are both created in the image of God. The principal argument that some Christians use to contradict this teaching of the Bible is that the submission of wives to husbands contradicts the Biblical teaching that men and women are equal to each other before God. Submission allegedly implies inferiority.

The clearest illustration that this is not the case is the incarnation and the submission of Jesus Christ, not only to His Heavenly Father but also to His earthly parents. (LUKE 2:51) In Luke #2 v. 51 the Gospel writer says that Jesus as a child continued in subjection to His parents. Does that mean that Jesus was inferior to His human parents? I don't think so. He was God in the flesh; yet He submitted to His earthly parents. Submission does not necessarily mean inferiority. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This responsibility of a Christian wife to submit to her husband also does not mean that a woman should go to the point of violating other commands of the Bible in order to get along with her husband. It does not mean that she should put up with physical abuse. It does not mean that a woman should tolerate a husband's unfaithfulness.

I have seen sad situations where Christian women have interpreted this verse to mean that they ought to hang in there and be as nice to their husband as they can be, even though he is running around with another woman. That is the wrong response. When an individual violates his wedding vows and the sanctity of marriage, the injured party needs to force a confrontation and make the sinning one decide whom he (or she) is going to follow. A book that I have given out to a number of women in this situation over the course of my ministry is James Dobson's *Love Must Be Tough*. (PROJECTOR ON--- LOVE MUST BE TOUGH) If you know someone going through this kind of situation, get them this book.

C.

Let's consider then WHAT THIS COMMAND IS. (I. B. C. WHAT IT IS) The term "submit," or "be subject to," in the original Greek language was a military term that meant "to rank under" or "to respond to the authority of." In the relationship of a wife to a husband Biblical submission refers to (DEFINITION...) **"The responsibility of the wife to acknowledge, encourage, and yield to the leadership of her husband."**

D.

Notice THE PURPOSE for this command in our passage. Peter says that wives are to submit so that if their husbands **"do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives..."** The expression "do not obey the word" most likely means that Peter is talking about wives

who are married to non-Christians. (I. C. D. ITS PURPOSE) The same expression is used in #2 v. 8. The people in view there are clearly unbelievers. There may be valid applications from our verse to Christian wives who have Christian husbands who are not following the Lord, but the specific situation that Peter has in view here seems to involve unsaved husbands.

The primary characteristic of this subjection on the part of the wives is to be changed behavior. The natural reaction of many mates who trust Christ as their Savior is to tell their husbands, or wives, about the change that has taken place in them. That is fine. But the problem comes when the new Christian in the family wants the other family members to become Christians so badly that he or she talks about it to the point of pushiness.

The most effective technique, the apostle says, is to show changed behavior. Our family members know us so well that what communicates most effectively to them is not words but changed behavior. Give them a chance to see the difference. When people see that there is something different about our lives in a positive way, they will ask questions. The opportunities will then come to point them to Jesus.

There is a broader purpose for submission of wives to husbands. Other New Testament passages, including the ones that I cited earlier, indicate that submission to one's husband is a responsibility for Christian wives not just when their husbands are unbelievers, or when they are carnal Christians, but also when the husbands are believers who have a right relationship with God. In Ephesians #5 Paul says that this submission is a divinely intended illustration of the church's relationship to Jesus.

But it is also the way in which God created the family best to function. Many of our cultural leaders have sought to minimize the differences between men and women, but they cannot be ignored. Christian medical doctor Walt Larimore wrote a book several years ago entitled *His Brain, Her Brain* (HIS BRAIN HER BRAIN). In it he cites numerous research studies that show how the neurological differences between males and females that begin in the womb make men and women uniquely different creatures with different ways of relating to the world around us.

At one point he writes, **“One review of over twenty studies on marital happiness concluded that wife-dominated unions were the least happy and that wives in the wife-dominated unions were less happy than their husbands. In other words, marriages seem to work best when ‘the wife can influence the husband but doesn't try to dominate or disrespect him.’”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

Bradford Wilcox is a sociologist and the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. In analyzing data from the National Survey of Families and Households he concluded, **“Women who have more traditional gender attitudes are significantly happier in their marriages.”** (*Christianity Today*, October, 2006) Such is what the data shows.

The immediate purpose for wifely submission in this passage is that unbelieving husbands might be drawn to Christ. The broader purpose is that God made us in such a way that marriages function best when husbands lovingly lead and wives submit and encourage that leadership.

II. A.

Verses 2-4 describe WIFELY SUBMISSION AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS. (II. WIFELY SUBMISSION AND...)
Verse 2 talks about RESPECTFUL AND PURE CONDUCT. (II. WIFELY SUBMISSION... A. RESPECTFUL AND...)
Peter speaks of Christian wives winning their husbands **“when they see your respectful and pure conduct.”** Actions do speak louder than words. A nagging wife who stops nagging, a disagreeable wife who stops disagreeing, and a complaining wife who stops complaining will catch his attention.

The text says specifically that the woman is to be pure in her conduct. The original word for “pure” is sometimes used in the New Testament of sexual purity. More often it is used of moral purity in general. It is not that the wife is required to be sinless, but her life should be characterized generally by an avoidance of sin.

She is also to be respectful. Literally, it is “conduct with fear.” Perhaps this respect is to be directed toward the husband, or perhaps to the Lord, or perhaps to both.

B.

According to vv. 3 & 4, this behavior is also to be characterized by an INNER ADORNMENT. (II. A. B. INNER ADORNMENT) You may notice that the word “only” or “merely” in many of your translations is in italics. That means it is not actually in the original text. Literally the verse says, **“Do not let your adorning, or adornment, be external...”** Some Christians have interpreted that to mean that women should not wear any makeup or jewelry or adornment of any kind. But if we follow that line of reasoning, we would also have to say that women should not braid their hair wear jewelry, or wear any clothes at all, because that is literally what the text says.

Women in that day bleached their hair, wore wigs, and used lipstick, eye shadow, rouge, and perfume. Makeup is hardly a recent invention. Some women of means also would pile up their hair on top of their heads and put combs and jewels and gold in it. Thus this adornment could become a competitive thing as women would seek to show off their wealth and status to other people. These women were focused on bringing attention to themselves. This is what Peter appears to be speaking against.

A similar thing can, and does, happen today. Women can dress in such a way as to bring much attention to themselves. Some can go to the other extreme and take pride in wearing old clothes and looking sloppy all of the time. I am not sure that this is so good either. The Bible says that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. So a case can be made that we have a responsibility to have our temples looking reasonably decent.

There probably needs to be a balance in our approach to physical appearance. We need to keep ourselves looking respectable without at the same time trying to draw a lot of attention to ourselves. If a woman dresses in such a way that when she enters a room, all of the men start turning their heads, and the other ladies begin to do a slow burn, that probably is not the best thing.

If a Christian woman finds herself spending more time on her physical appearance than on the development of her spiritual life and character, that also should be a warning signal. Peter explains what the priority should be in v. 4: **"...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."**

The development of the inner spiritual life produces an imperishable quality as compared to the perishable and temporary fashions of the day. That imperishable quality that is produced will be a gentle and quiet spirit.

The word for "gentle" here is sometimes translated as "meek." It is the same word that is used in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus says that the meek, or the gentle, will inherit the earth. The original term refers to an inward quality of humility that reflects itself in a spirit of toleration and patience.

The opposite quality would be something like "self-interest" or "self-assertion." Our word "gentle" falls a bit short of the true meaning because it often is understood to refer to outward actions. The problem with our English word "meek" is that it is often associated with weakness or softness of willpower. The Greek word here, *prautes*, is describing a strong inner quality. It is a quality that is necessary to

persevere with an unsaved husband and to attract him to the Lord. It is a quality that a godly woman needs to develop in order to handle whatever kind of suffering that may come across her path.

The other term that appears in v. 4 is “quiet spirit.” The mention of that causes some Christian women to cringe. Women often like to talk, and the thought of this instruction is enough to produce instant guilt in some ladies. The original term, however, does not relate necessarily to how much a woman talks. It again has to do with an inner quality, this time involving a spirit of tranquility. It is a gentle way of being that does not cause conflict or disturbance. It does not promote turmoil or upsettendness. A woman who possesses it brings peace and encouragement to the situation and to the group that she enters.

So it is possible to have a Christian woman who talks a fair amount and still has a quiet spirit because the things that she says do not cause people to be upset and do not promote conflict. She doesn't spread rumors and does not get other Christians riled up about some issue. In fact, she has a calming effect on other people. Perhaps she is even encouraging.

On the other hand, it is theoretically possible to have a woman, or a man, who says very little, yet does not have a quiet spirit. For the things that she, or he, does say promote disharmony and friction. She knows how to push the right buttons to get people agitated.

A primary theme of this letter relates to perseverance and holy behavior in the face of suffering. This passage acknowledges that one source of suffering for women is an unsaved husband. Peter recognizes that this situation is tough. But the right thing to do is to seek a gentle and quiet spirit, because this is precious in the sight of God. This kind of behavior is precious to our Heavenly Father.

Other Scriptures make it clear that this is the attitude that we are to have if our husband is a believer, too. So there is a broader application. Christian wives are responsible to be subject to their husbands in an appropriate way. That is difficult to do in the midst of a culture that encourages women to demand their rights, to require equal treatment and equal pay, to fight for at least an equal position in the home.

As Christian women, you may know about this teaching and give lip service to it. The temptation is to consciously or unconsciously work against it. You may wait for your husband to make a final decision on a particular matter. But in the meantime you can bug him about it and get in little criticisms and manipulate circumstances behind the scenes. You can withhold intimacies. The temptation is to struggle for control and to try to make sure that your views prevail. That is not Biblical submissiveness, and the

result often is antagonism and deterioration of a marriage. It is also a failure of faith. It is a failure to trust God and to be obedient to Him.

Women need to make their views known. There is nothing wrong with that. To be effective it is often helpful to have the right timing and to use good words and to have a respectful manner. After that, it is important with an issue that is significant to you and that may be an issue of disagreement to pray and to trust God to work in and through your husband.

III.

Finally, in vv. 5 & 6 the Apostle Peter deals with WIFELY SUBMISSION AND ITS ROLE MODELS. (III. WIFELY SUBMISSION AND ITS ROLE MODELS) He writes, **“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.”** These godly women of the past not only were submissive to their husbands, but they also hoped in God.

This hope in God is a key concept. In a situation where a Christian woman has an unsaved husband, or a Christian husband who is not walking closely with the Lord, there will be needs in the woman that are not being met by the husband. There may be longings for security or significance, for appreciation or recognition or spiritual leadership. The temptation will be to try to encourage or manipulate or maneuver that man to be the kind of person that we would like him to be. Usually it doesn't work.

The answer is to be submissive where we can and to place our hope in God, to develop a close relationship with Him by prayer and Bible study so that we can depend upon Him to meet those deep personal needs. It is also helpful to develop close ties with godly Christian women. If you choose to be close to the wrong kind of woman, or women, she may only cultivate anger and discourage the pursuit of a submissive spirit.

In v. 6 Peter refers to Sarah as an example of a godly woman who submitted to, and obeyed, her husband. Abraham's life, though it was not sinless, could not be characterized as disobedient to the Word. The point of comparison is Sarah's submissiveness. In Genesis #18 she overheard God telling Abraham that he and Sarah were going to have a son in their old age. (PROJECTOR ON--- GENESIS 18:12) Sarah says in v. 12, **“After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?”** Peter is pointing to her reference to Abraham as “lord.” The apostle says that a Christian woman who displays this kind of spirit of respect and does what is right is a spiritual descendant of Sarah. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Peter adds, “...and do not fear anything that is frightening.” The exact meaning of this clause is uncertain. Perhaps it is fear of one’s husband. Perhaps it is fear about what will happen as a result of being submissive to one’s husband. Perhaps it is simply the fear that comes from yielding control of our lives to someone else.

God’s Word is clear. Christian women are commanded to be submissive to their husbands. That job is especially difficult when one’s husband is disobedient to the Word. But the course of action that is most likely to draw him to the Lord is a spirit of submission and godly behavior.

Abigail Adams, (PROJECTOR ON--- ABIGAIL ADAMS) the wife of President John Adams, was a brilliant woman. Because of his many years of public service in Philadelphia and Europe, much of their married life was spent apart. They wrote long letters to each other, many of which have survived. Those letters reveal a keen intellect, a broad education, and considerable talents in Abigail.

Pauline Maier notes in her review of David McCullough’s biography of John Adams (*NYT Book Review*, 5/27/2001), “**Abigail was John’s partner in every sense: she not only managed the family’s finances but was his greatest supporter, his most trusted political adviser and a source and object of immense affection.**” In one of her letters Abigail writes, “**I believe nature has assigned each sex its particular duties and sphere of action and to act well your part, ‘there all the honor lies.’**”

If we believe in a sovereign God, then we must trust that all of us have been given roles to play in this life--- at home, at work, at school, at church, in the community. (PROJECTOR OFF) The honor comes for all of us in fulfilling those roles to the best of our ability.