

1 Peter-Suffering, Submission, & Service Like the Savior—1 Peter 2:13-17  
College Baptist Church  
April 11, 2021

I invite you to turn with me to 1 Peter 2:18. 1 Peter can be found toward the end of the New Testament, just after the book of James. If you didn't bring a Bible, there are Bibles in the pew racks; I believe you will find 1 Peter 2:18 on p. 1015. Today's sermon text is also printed in the bulletin along with space for taking notes.

Two weeks ago, we took a look at 1 Peter 2:13-17. And you might remember that in that passage, Peter commanded the first recipients of his letter to "*be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution*"—and this subjection or submission included submission to the emperor. Now, this was a shocking command because the Roman Emperor at the time was likely Nero—who was a known adulterer, murderer, and persecutor of Christians. So, it is important to know *why* Peter commanded Christians to submit to a pagan civic government. And the reason was "*for the Lord's sake.*" In other words, Christians conduct themselves submissively to governing authorities—even when they are sinfully flawed—to show that they are ultimately "*servants of God,*" not man. In this way, their conduct as good citizens is a great evangelistic witness to the onlooking world—that the world might see our good deeds and glorify God (2:12).

So, verses 13-17 really focused on the Christians relationship to what we might call Big Government. But in verses 18 and following, Peter shifts the focus to a smaller—but no less significant—sphere, the home. Throughout human history, the household has rightly been seen as the foundation of society. And this was certainly the case in the Greco-Roman world—from Plato to Aristotle to Seneca to Plutarch, the great philosophers and writers of the Greco-Roman tradition saw the household as "*the basis for a strong, orderly, and prosperous society.*"<sup>i</sup>

Knowing this to be the case, the Apostle Peter writes explicit instructions to three different sub-categories of people in the home—slaves, wives, and husbands. But instead of simply reiterating Greco-Roman household codes, he offers uniquely Christian perspectives about how slaves, wives, and husbands should conduct themselves in the home from chapter 2, verse 18 to chapter 3, verse 7. Then, he follows these specific instructions with more general instructions to all Christians in verses 3:8-17. So, please listen as I read, 1 Peter 2:18-3:17.

*Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. <sup>19</sup> For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup> For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. <sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup> He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup> When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that*

*we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

*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, <sup>2</sup> when they see your respectful and pure conduct. <sup>3</sup> Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, <sup>6</sup> as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.*

*<sup>7</sup> 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.*

*Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. <sup>9</sup> Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. <sup>10</sup> For*

*“Whoever desires to love life*

*and see good days,*

*let him keep his tongue from evil*

*and his lips from speaking deceit;*

*<sup>11</sup> let him turn away from evil and do good;*

*let him seek peace and pursue it.*

*<sup>12</sup> For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,*

*and his ears are open to their prayer.*

*But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”*

*<sup>13</sup> Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, <sup>15</sup> but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, <sup>16</sup> having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.*

Now I want you to know up-front that the majority of the sermon will focus on verses 2:18 through 3:7, because I believe the lessons learned from Peter's specific instruction to slaves, wives, and husbands form a foundation for the more general instructions to all Christians found in verses 3:8-3:17. So, don't be nervous by the time on the clock when I get to verse 3:8...at that point, I should be nearing the homestretch of the sermon. That being said, let's jump right in to the thorny issue of slavery in chapter 2, verse 18.

### **Suffering as Slaves—2:8-25**

Notice, I did say slavery—even though the ESV text reads “*servants*.” That is because the word in the text refers to “*household slaves*”—which were incredibly common in the Greco-Roman world. According to one biblical scholar, “*it is estimated that almost one-quarter of the empire’s population were slaves.*” And while it is true that some slaves entered into relationship with a master voluntarily for a period of time—more like indentured servitude than slavery—it is also true that some were made slaves involuntarily—for instance, by birth, being captured in battle, or as a judicial sentence.<sup>ii</sup>

And regardless of *how* an individual came into slavery—a slave found himself on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. In fact, most in the Greco-Roman world saw slaves as property without moral agency—that is, without the capacity to make morally responsible choices. They were little more than cattle or donkeys to their owners—assets on the balance sheet to produce more wealth. So, it ought not surprise us that slaves in the first century experienced unjust suffering at the hands of their masters.

But the Apostle Peter addresses these household slaves *directly*—which is rather surprising on a number of levels. First, it means that somehow, some way, these severely underprivileged members of society had heard and embraced the Gospel and become Christians—making them part of God’s eternal family. Second, it means that Peter sees Christian slaves as morally responsible individuals—not mere property. And he sees that these household slaves have an immediate opportunity to powerfully exemplify Jesus in the midst of their less-than-ideal circumstances.

Now, let me be clear, Peter’s direct address of these household slaves is *not* an endorsement of slavery. And it is beyond horrific to know that professing Christians living in ante-bellum America used texts like this one to justify the sinful practice of chattel slavery. Thankfully, bold Christians like William Wilberforce in England and Frederick Douglass in America, employed their Bible-shaped consciences to speak out against the wicked slave trade—bringing it to an end before it did even greater damage than it already had. So, if Peter’s instruction to slaves is not an endorsement of slavery, what is it?

I believe it is the acknowledgement of the reality of slavery for some—perhaps many—Christians living in Northern Asia Minor in the first century. By addressing them as slaves and acknowledging their unjust suffering, he is acknowledging their incredibly difficult plight. And he is also offering them an incredibly powerful evangelistic opportunity.

Notice that the main command to these household slaves in verse 18 is “*be subject to your masters with all respect.*” But we can’t end there, because the phrase continues, “*not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.*” Now at first glance, that seems like a cruel command. But that is because it sounds like suffering without purpose. But Peter isn’t calling these enslaved Christians to senseless suffering. He is calling them to suffer like the Savior—Jesus himself.

Listen again to verse 21, *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.* Peter is saying that slaves—especially those who suffer unjustly at the hands of their wicked masters—have been uniquely called to imitate the *example* of Jesus Christ—the Suffering Servant.

Do you remember when you were in early elementary school and your teachers taught you handwriting? Those teachers taught by using *examples*, right? Before they ever expected you to write a letter free-hand, they would provide worksheets with letters to trace. You learned to form your letters properly by *tracing the examples* over and over and over again. And that is actually what Peter is describing in verse 21. He is calling slaves experiencing unjust suffering to trace the perfect example, to become a copy of Jesus, to follow in his steps.

And then he goes on in verses 22-25 to remind us of the steps of Jesus the Suffering Servant—drawing from Isaiah 53. And when you read those verses you see how Isaiah’s prophetic word was played out in the unjust trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Despite the injustice of it all—Jesus did not sin, he did not revile, he did not threaten. Instead, he entrusted himself to God the Father according to the plan—bearing our sins in his body on the cursed tree of Calvary, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. And in so doing, we were brought into the fold of Jesus, the Shepherd of our souls.

So, Peter is saying that slaves have a unique opportunity—for as long as they find themselves in a place of injustice—to suffer like the Savior. Their submission to unjust suffering makes them a carbon-copy of Jesus for all the world to see. Now, thankfully, it is unlikely that you will ever find yourself as a household slave. But that doesn’t mean that you won’t experience unjust suffering as a Christian. How will you respond? Will people see your response and say, “I see a glimpse of Jesus—the Suffering Servant?”

### **Submitting as Wives—3:1-6**

The next sub-category of a typical household addressed by Peter is wives. Notice that the command to women in verse 3:1 is the same as the command to slaves in 2:18—“*be subject,*” that is, be submissive. So, just as slaves are to be submissive to their masters, wives are to be submissive—*not* to masters and *not* to men in general, *but* “*to [their] own husbands.*” This is the same command as the Apostle Paul gives to wives in Ephesians 5:22, when he says “*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*” And as we said a couple weeks ago, the word “submit” is meant to describe willingly coming under the care and authority of another. It is *not* unconditional obedience, but it *is* a radical willingness to humble oneself under the headship of another.

Now in Ephesians 5, Paul bolsters his argument for wifely submission in the Gospel itself. He reminds the Ephesians that just as the Church submits to Christ, who loved her and gave himself for her, so should wives submit to husbands who are called to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. So, a Christian marriage is designed by God to be a beautiful picture of the Gospel for all the world to see.

But Peter takes a slightly different approach to submission here in 1 Peter 3. He still has the Gospel in mind, but he especially sees wifely submission as *Gospel proclamation* to unbelieving husbands—those who “*do not obey the word.*”

We need to understand that in Greco-Roman culture it was expected that wives believe in the same gods and have the same friends as their husbands.<sup>iii</sup> So, if a wife converted to Christianity it may make things difficult in her home and in society. She would be worshipping a different God and making friends with brothers and sisters in the church—which may have been viewed as suspicious and subversive by her pagan husband and the society around her. So, Peter sees submission—not speech—as the key way to winning a non-believing husband to Christ. Peter suggests that *respectful and pure conduct* has greater Gospel potential than unwanted evangelistic sermons over the dinner table.

Building on this spirit of respect and purity—Peter goes on to speak about the priority of cultivating inner beauty of gentleness and peacefulness for Christian wives. While the world looks on external beauty—braided hair, gold jewelry, and name-brand clothing, the Lord looks on the heart. In this command we hear echoes of Proverbs 31:30, “*Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.*”

This is certainly not an absolute prohibition against external beauty, but rather a call to prioritize the kind of beauty that matters and lasts, not only in the sight of a husband, but in the sight of God himself. So, a good question for a Christian wife to ask herself might be, “do I spend as much energy and effort cultivating a spirit of gentleness and peace as I do putting on make-up and choosing an outfit?”

In prioritizing inner beauty, Christian wives are imitating *holy women who hope in God*. For example, Sarah willingly submitted to the husband God gave her—whether Abraham led by faith in the promises of God or faltered foolishly while sojourning in Egypt. In the end, a Christian wife submits to her husband out of submission to God—which also reminds us of Jesus, who submitted to the Father’s purposes. In a similar way, a Christian wife submits like Jesus for a purpose—with the desire that her respectful conduct will draw her husband to greater obedience to God’s word—especially a non-believing husband, who has yet to give his entire allegiance to Jesus.

### **Serving as Husbands—3:7**

Finally, Peter addresses husbands in verse 7. Notice that he has gone from those of lesser to greater authority in the home in the Greco-Roman world—from slaves to wives to husbands. And I want us to see that the command to husbands—though different and shorter than the commands to slaves and wives—is incredibly counter-cultural, both back-then and today.

To this point, notice that the consistent command has been “*be subject.*” All Christians should “*be subject*” to human institutions (2:13). Christian household slaves should “*be subject*” to masters (2:18). Christian wives should “*be subject*” to their own husbands (3:1). But the command to husbands is different. In verse 7, Peter says, “*live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel.*”

To *live with* your wives *with understanding* is reminiscent of Genesis 2, when marriage is described as a “one flesh” relationship where a man “leaves and cleaves”—he leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife. As Pastor-Scholar Ray Ortlund says,

*“One flesh” is essential to the biblical view of marriage. It means, one mortal life fully shared. Two selfish me’s start learning to think like one unified us, sharing one everything: one life, one reputation, one bed, one suffering, one budget, one family, one mission, and so forth. No barriers. No hiding. No aloofness. Now total openness with total sharing and total solidarity, until death parts them.*”<sup>iv</sup>

Biblical marriage is about *living with* someone—knowing and understanding someone with complete intimacy. Secular marriage in the first century and today doesn’t really prioritize this sort of understanding. Neither does secular marriage show real honor.

Peter says that Christian husbands are called to *honor* their wives as “*weaker vessels*.” This phrase is simply a statement to acknowledge the biological differences between male and female. By God’s design, women have a more delicate physical make-up. And don’t let the term “*weaker vessel*” overshadow the command to “*honor*” wives. In fact, this call to honor wives as weaker vessels is probably a subtle, but firm, prohibition against physical abuse in the home. Christian men must never use their strength to harm their wives. Rather, we ought to harness our strength to protect and provide. My mentor, Dr. Scott Hafemann calls this “reverse lordship”—husbands using their strength to serve their wives rather than demanding to be served.

After all, Peter reminds Christian husbands that their wives are co-heirs of the grace of life—which I take to mean that women and men are equal recipients of the gift of life—possessing equal dignity as human beings made in the image of God. This is a radically different view of women than the secular world. In fact, even secular historian Tom Holland admits this fact. He writes, “*That every human being possessed an equal dignity was not remotely a self-evident truth. A Roman would have laughed at it. To campaign against discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexuality, however, was to depend on large numbers of people sharing in a common assumption: that everyone possessed an inherent worth. The origins of this principle . . . lay not in the French Revolution, nor in the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible.*”<sup>v</sup>

In other words, the Bible has an incredibly high view of women. And Jesus himself exemplified this in his ministry to women and his affirmation of their bold faith—especially their faith in the resurrection as the first eye-witnesses of the empty tomb. Jesus brought greater freedom and worth to women than secular society had ever afforded them.

And Peter suggests that this high view of women should be practiced in the Christian home for all the world to see. So, husbands, as we live in our homes, may we lead by serving our wives with honor, even as Christ selflessly served us.

## Closing

Now, not all of you are slaves, wives, or husbands, but Peter goes on to explain in verses 3:8-3:17 how “*all of you*” should conduct yourselves in the spheres of life in which you live—especially when you experience suffering. You see, we can’t always control our roles in the home and society, but we can all seek to imitate Jesus in whatever we do—whether we are called to suffer, submit, or serve like the Savior. So, I challenge you to spend some time in the week ahead looking at the more general instructions in verses 3:8-3:17—because these are commands that apply to “*all of you*.” And we will look at those instructions more closely together next week. Let’s pray.

## Benediction—1 Peter 5:10-11

[May] the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, . . . restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. <sup>11</sup> To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jobe, 181

<sup>ii</sup> See ESV Preface under the heading “The Translation of Specialized Terms”

<sup>iii</sup> Jobe, 203 citing Plutarch

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/what-is-marriage-according-to-the-bible/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jesus-changed-everything-women/>