

Guidelines for Godliness: Exegesis of I Peter 3

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Part One: To Wives (I Peter 3:1-6)

1) “Likewise, wives, be submissive to your own husbands, so that, even if some do not believe the Word, by the conduct of their wives they may without a word be won, 2) when they observe your reverent, chaste conduct. 3) Let your adornment not be that outward braiding of the hair and wearing gold, nor putting on clothes; 4) rather let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is priceless in the eyes of God. 5) For in this way, also the holy wives of old who trusted in God adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, 6) as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord; you are her daughters as long as you do what is good and are not at all afraid of intimidation.”

Peter continues with exhortations begun already in a general way in Chapter One and addressed to specific classes beginning in 2:18 with “servants.” Grammatically, “wives” is not a vocative, for a vocative would call for a finite verb; neither can the participle *ὑποτασσόμεναι* be considered an imperative. But certainly this must be the sense of each in translation, as also Luther, the A.V., and most other translations render. Peter is talking to all believing wives. Wives should obey their husbands. Peter uses the middle form of the verb to indicate that the obedience of a believing wife is of her own volition. The A.V. uses “subjection” here, but submission better indicates the feeling of the middle voice. Translating the identical verb form from St. Paul, the A.V. there captures its tone: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord” (Eph. 5:22).¹

In the first verse we see Peter’s concern for a situation with which many Christian wives must have had to deal. In the early church there were a large number of families in which only one of the spouses had been converted. This is always true in a growing church. Obviously, both spouses may find themselves in such a position, although Peter here mentions only the wife. Paul writes of both possibilities to the Corinthians: “If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?” (I Corinthians 7:12b-14a,16).

The basic meaning of *ἀπειθέω* is “disobey.” In the context of Scriptures, however, and when used with “the Word” it refers to the supreme disobedience of unbelief; thus the translation of verse 1.² Peter is not talking about converted husbands who in weakness do not “obey” certain parts of “the Word” which pertain to their conduct for married life. He is speaking of husbands who have not accepted “the Word,” God’s entire revealed message, especially that of the Gospel. It is important to note here that *λόγῳ* is preceded by the article; it is “the” Word of God.

The main purpose for the wife’s submission to her husband is to show her love for Christ as Peter mentions later in this chapter (v.18). The *ἵνα* introduces a clause stating a parallel purpose for her obedience:

¹ See also Colossians 3:18.

² See John 3:36 where *ἀπειθέω* is used synonymously with *πιστευώ* and translated “not believe” by A.V.

that...by the conduct of their wives they may without a word be won.” This is how the wife is to win her husband to Christ, not by nagging or by a constant repetition of Scripture passages, but by exemplary conduct. Here λόγου appears without an article. It cannot here refer to the Word of God. There are no variant manuscripts; the addition of an article in the A.V. is incorrect. Faith in the unbelieving husband cannot be created without “the Word,”³ but it can come without “a word” from the wife. Peter is not repudiating the words of St. Paul, “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Romans 10:17). He is simply saying what kind of conduct on the part of the wife can lead her husband to the saving Word.⁴ When he observes her “reverent, chaste conduct,” she will have “without a word” heaped “coals of fire on his head” (Romans 12:2). The husband will want to knock off the coals; he will want to ease his conscience; and then the converting power of the Word will take hold.

The “reverent, chaste conduct” mentioned in verse 2 is described in the succeeding verses. The wife’s reverence is fear of God, not of her husband, as Peter will make clear in verse 6b. ἐν φόβῳ is used as an adjective defining the wife’s conduct. To translate “chaste in fear” is incorrect, and to render “conduct in fear” is stilted and misleading.

Both chastity and a reverent fear of God require the inner rather than the outer adornment of the wife. The first meaning of κόσμους is “adornment” and not “world” or “universe.” From the verb form we get our word “cosmetic.” Fixing of the hair, wearing of jewelry, and dressing in appealing clothing are outward adornments only; they fade, wear out, grow old-fashioned, and are changed frequently. The quality of a “gentle and quiet spirit,” however, never grows old or trite. It is imperishable, and as far as God is concerned priceless.

Verse three is still sometimes interpreted so strictly that it is considered literally as a dress code together with I Timothy 2:9. That was not St. Paul’s intent in writing to Timothy. Armin Schuetze explains in the *Northwestern Lutheran*:

Peter, too, is concerned not simply with a woman’s hairdo and clothes, but with the inward spirit which she displays. So the question is not simply whether or not to braid one’s hair, but the question is whether or not what is done is immodest, indecent, is evidence of a preoccupation with self and with riches.⁵

At the same time there is always the danger of over-explaining this verse in terms of the customs of Peter’s day. Peter’s exhortation is still very fitting for the wives of our day: Nor is Peter here limiting his words for wives of unbelieving husbands. The temptation to make cosmetic display of outward adornment is active in our appearance-conscious society. Perhaps we are guilty of cowardly failing to set forth even the spirit of Peter’s word because so many women in our churches sidestep the letter of them. We can hardly plead a change of customs to soften the tone of verse 3; the ostentatious wearing of hair, jewelry, and clothing by women is a custom that has remained unchanged in two thousand years. Perhaps the best practical interpretation of this verse is given by Luther who speaks of a wife’s adornment in relation to her obedience and love for her husband:

You are adorned beautifully enough when you are adorned for your husband. Christ does not want you to adorn yourself to please others and be called a pretty wench. But you must see to it that you wear the hidden treasure and precious ornament imperishably in your heart.⁶

Peter now mentions the fine example of women in the old Testament. Kretzmann writes,

³ Cf. Formula of Concord, *Triglotta*, 787, 3.

⁴ Cf. Apology, *Triglotta*, 371, 28-32.

⁵ “May Women Braid Their Hair?” (A Lantern to Our Footsteps), *NWL*, Vol. 53, No. 13, June 26, 1966.

⁶ *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 30, “The Catholic Epistles,” p. 89.

The meek and quiet attitude which has been praised by the apostle will naturally be accompanied by that conduct which unhesitatingly acknowledges the headship of the man. This is the chief, the finest ornament of a wife professing Christianity, as the example of the women of the Bible shows. Their hope was directed toward God and His promises; they knew that the reward of God was greater than anything that the world might offer and give, if they should want to follow its vanities.⁷

These women were ἅγαι, “holy”; that is, their faith in God showed itself in the action of sanctified, holy, good works. Their works were many, but all of them were centered on their recognition of the role God has assigned them from the Fall: “Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Genesis 3:16b).

A notable example is Sarah. Her husband was a rich man, yet she adorned herself not outwardly, but with the inner man. She acknowledged Abraham to be her lord (Genesis 18:12).⁸ Peter notes only one event in her life. This incident characterizes her total conduct over against her husband. Every believing woman whose life can be thus described is a daughter of Sarah. In what sense? Lenski’s explanation is good:

Abraham is the father of believers, and thus Abraham’s wife Sarah is after a fashion placed on the same level; all believing wives are also called her children. This certainly exalts Sarah, yet does so only because she was obedient to Abraham and called him her lord.⁹

Peter leaves no doubt in the minds of his women readers that wives are to be submissive to their husbands. It is interesting to see how Peter finds it necessary to remind wives of his time of a scriptural example which took place some nineteen hundred plus years before he wrote his epistle. The women (and men) who today seek to have the “obey” dropped from our Christian wedding ceremony are equally removed in time from Peter’s exhortation to wives for obedience. The critics who accuse Paul of having no experience of or no feeling for the marriage state because of his rigid training under the Pharisees would have difficulty bringing Peter under the same charge. Some have even thought Peter to be married at the time he wrote this letter!¹⁰ For us, however, who know that the pens of both apostles were guided by the Spirit, the case for wifely obedience needs no defense.¹¹

Wives continue to be the daughters of Sarah by faith “as long as you do what is good and are not afraid of intimidation” (v.6). *πτόησιν* may have either an active or a passive meaning.¹² Both fit very well in this passage. “Intimidation” is the active. A wife who is submissive will not always find that her obedience is rewarded with kindness. She will feel the pressure of liberal opinion from unconverted wives who resent her example as well as the abuse from a husband who takes advantage of her meekness. “Fear” is the passive result of being intimidated. Fear of the consequences of intimidation may deter her from conducting her life in the way God wishes. She may well have to suffer because of her doing what is right, but she must nevertheless not become apprehensive, for that is sinful worry. Peter explains later in vv. 14-17: “If ye suffer for righteousness’ sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience; that whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing.”

⁷ *Popular Commentary, N.T. Vol. II*, pp. 530-531.

⁸ This is the only reference of Sarah’s calling Abraham lord, even though there seems to be a weakness of faith in doubting God’s promise expressed by her, as well as the strength to which Peter refers.

⁹ *Interpretation of Peter, John, and Jude*, p. 134.

¹⁰ Some believe that *συνελεκτη* in 5:13 refers to Peter’s wife and not the church. Cf. also I Corinthians 9:5.

¹¹ Cf. “Should the Wife Promise to Obey?” (A Lantern to Our Footsteps), *NWL*, Vol 48, No. 17, August 13, 1961.

¹² *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 735.

Part Two: To Husbands (I Peter 3:7)

7) “Likewise, husbands, live with them according to knowledge, giving honor to the wife as to a weaker vessel, as being also co-heirs of life’s grace, so that your prayers may not be hindered.”

Peter now addresses Christian husbands. “Likewise” links the husbands to the honor which Peter asks all believers to show one another. In 2:17 he exhorts all his readers, “Honor all men.” From this he makes three departures: first, for servants (1:18); then, for wives (2:1); and now for husbands, before he returns to general exhortations in the next verse.

Husbands are to live with their wives according to knowledge. *συνοικοῦντες* occurs only here in the New Testament; it is one of over sixty *hapaxlegomena* in this first epistle. “Cohabit” is the only single English word that translates it, but since “cohabit” implies fornication we use “live with” and add “them” to complete the thought. It is doubtful that Peter is attacking any particular problem with the words in this verse. The present participles call for an ongoing action and do not include the idea of breaking off from some former involvement. Since these husbands trust in that same Word as the wives in v. 1, the knowledge which they apply in living with their wives is that gained from the Scriptures. Is it not that divine knowledge which Peter has just cited for the wives in the example of Sarah? We need not think of any other source for “knowledge.”

The husbands in the congregations Paul had established knew where to look for that knowledge. They could read from the books of Solomon: “Rejoice with the wife of thy youth...and be thou always ravished with her love” (Proverbs 5:18b,19b); “Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which He hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity; for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labor which thou takest under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:9). From Genesis they knew of the institution of marriage: “The Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make an help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18); they recognized God’s purposes in marriage to be companionship, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24); procreation, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 9:1); and chastity, “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Genesis 39:9). Both God’s curses (Genesis 3:16-19) and His blessings (Psalm 128) upon marriage were known to these readers of the Old Testament.

Knowledge of scriptural guidelines for marriage, however, was not limited to writings from the Old Covenant for these husbands. From what little evidence can be found, it is generally agreed among scholars that the Second Epistle of Peter was written first.¹³ In his Second Epistle Peter says that his readers have the letters of Paul (II Peter 3:15,16). In addition to the many places Paul writes about marriage, there are numerous references to the duties of husbands in particular: “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence” (I Corinthians 7:3); “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it...So ought men to love their wives, even as their own bodies...Let every one of you love his wife, even as himself” (Ephesians 5:25,28,33). “Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them” (Colossians 3:19).

Nestle indicates by the placement of commas that he intends one *ὡς* phrase to accompany each participle. Grammatical arguments slightly favor this arrangement, even though it leaves a rather awkward translation. The sense of the verse is not changed, however, when we translate both *ὡς* phrases with the second participle. In this we follow Luther, the A.V. and the R.S.V.

The knowledge which husbands gain from Scriptures concerning the marriage relationship prompts them to give honor to their wives in two different ways. First, the husband recognizes his wife to be a “weaker vessel.” The comparative form of the adjective *ἀσθενεστέρῳ* is a gentle reminder to the husband that there is

¹³ The epistles of Peter, Paul, and John are arranged in our Bibles according to their length, the longest place first, not chronologically with respect to the date of writing.

more than one “vessel” in marriage. Both the husband and the wife are vessels: God’s vessels! God has given both husband and wife a role in marriage; and each Christian spouse who in faith accepts that God-given role becomes God’s vessel, that is, a container or implement, body and soul, for carrying out his or her assigned function.

When we understand “vessel” in this sense we will not misinterpret the weakness of the wife’s vessel. That there are differences between men and women is certainly shown in the Bible. They were created in different ways: the man was formed of the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7); the woman was formed of man’s rib (Genesis 2:21,22). They were created for different purposes: man was created to live in and to tend the garden (Genesis 2:8); woman was created to live with and be a helpmeet to the man (Genesis 2:18). Besides the differences in the manner of creation and the purpose of creation, there were sexual differences before the fall, as the wording of 3:16 indicates.

Nowhere, however, does the Bible say that any of these differences between man and woman resulted in an intellectual or physical superiority for the man. But some commentators leave the door open for this kind of thinking on the basis of Genesis 3:16a: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.” P.E. Kretzmann writes, “So woman’s nature was weakened as a result of the disturbance of the normal relationship between body and soul by sin.”¹⁴ Young suggests the same, “Perhaps those students of Scripture are correct who assert that there was an enfeebling of her body which resulted in a disturbance of the relation between body and soul.”¹⁵ Such statements may be themselves stand true, unless they imply that for some reason the relation between man’s body and soul was not also affected by sin, thus leaving man stronger in mind and body.

We must allow Peter’s words to give their own explanation of the weakness of the wife’s vessel. If we look back a few verses Peter has already explained this weakness to the wives: “Be submissive to your own husbands” (v.1). This is the only weakness which Peter speaks of in six verses to wives. The rest of Scripture supports the idea of Peter that the woman’s weakness lies in God’s enforced submission of her will to that of the man, not in any innate physical or intellectual inferiority to the man. Both Adam and Eve had to suffer the results of their sin according to their roles assigned in creation: she as the child-bearer with increased sorrow (Genesis 3:16a); and he as the breadwinner with thorns and sweat (Genesis 3:17-19). What differentiates their punishment is not some statement that woman’s body was weakened and man’s was not; it is God’s statement to Eve: “And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (3:16b).

It is going beyond what Peter says, then, to demand that wives are physically or emotionally weaker than husbands. Both have their strengths and weaknesses in these respects. This understanding of v. 7 is important for a husband. A correct knowledge of what his wife’s weakness is will lead him not to abuse her weakness. A husband gains little honor from his wife by enforcing his authority over her on the basis of physical or intellectual superiority. Luther writes: “You will accomplish nothing with blows; they will not make a woman pious and submissive. If you beat one devil out of her, you will beat two into her, as the saying goes.”¹⁶

It is wrong for a husband to demand submission of his wife on the basis of his superior intellectual or physical prowess. There are certainly instances in which the husband holds no such advantage. A believing husband rules with love and honors his wife when he regards her true disadvantage: God has told her to submit her physical, emotional, and intellectual powers—be they inferior, equal, or superior to her husband’s—in service and obedience to the man. This is the weakness God has placed upon her. Although her capabilities of themselves may be equal to man’s, they will most often manifest themselves inferior as they are ruled by her Christian submissive attitude.

¹⁴ *Popular Commentary, O.T. Vol. 1*, p. 9.

¹⁵ *Genesis 3*, p. 125.

¹⁶ *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 30, “The Catholic Epistles,” p. 88.

“Husbands” is plural along with all other forms referring to them or their wives with the exception of “wife” and “vessel.” Lenski’s explanation will suffice: Peter did not want to allow for the thought of polygamy.¹⁷ Peter now returns to the plural in the second *ὡς* phrase: “As being also co-heirs of life’s grace.”

The first thing which Peter teaches husbands from Scriptures about honoring their wives concerns their earthly, physical relationship *to each other* as man and wife. But there is another reason for the honor of a husband for his spouse introduced by the second *ὡς*: it concerns the spiritual relationship of a husband and wife *to God*. The wife is a co-heir of life’s grace. The first is a relationship necessary for the harmony God intends for marriage; in that there is rank: the husband first, the wife second. In this second relationship there is no rank: “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. . . there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26,28b). It is their mutual spiritual oneness in Christ that will lead both husband and wife to carry out their God-given roles in the earthly marriage relationship. As co-heirs they will strive to make their differing earthly roles serve their single heavenly goal. In faith they will make their marriage on earth lead to heaven, where “they neither marry, nor are given in marriage” (Matthew 22:30).

“Life’s grace” is God’s undeserved love for us, a love which is reflected already in this life by husband and wife. Thus life can have two meanings. It can be the life which is to come for us as a result of God’s grace, or it can be the spiritual life which we now possess. Only Peter uses this combination of words. Both interpretations are plausible, and perhaps both are intended since the ideas are so closely related. Our translation favors the thought of the spiritual life of the believer on earth. It is supported by the adjective, *συγκληρονόμοις*, which gains its force as a present participle from its connection with the rest of the verse. Wives are already “co-heirs of life’s grace”: they already share with their husbands the sanctifying influence of the Spirit. Husbands should honor them accordingly.

This section to husbands is much shorter than that spoken to wives. The guidelines are less detailed, but just as clear: “Give honor!” Because she bears children and because the focus of her work is on the home, the woman’s work is more fully defined. Speaking to husbands, however, Luther says, “It is impossible to set specific bounds for you. Here you yourself must know how to proceed thoughtfully.”¹⁸ And P.E. Kretzmann also, instead of listing particular suggestions for the husband, says that they should treat their wives “with the application of Christian common sense.”¹⁹

When husbands do not give honor the result is bitterness. Whether the wife puts her complaint into words, or whether she conceals her hurt inside, the fact is the same: she has been offended. If this is the case, the husband should not imagine that his prayers are heard in heaven. The words of Jesus apply: “If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee: Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Matthew 5:23,24).

Peter puts the case in the positive. If the husband honors his wife by recognizing his dual role over against her as the head of the family and as a co-heir of life’s grace, there will be no hindrance to prayer. Peter takes it for granted that the Christian husband will resort often to prayer. He would not want to jeopardize his access to the throne of grace with unloving actions. Because of man’s sinfulness the happiness which God intends for the estate of marriage is often placed in danger. Sin brings along with it the necessity of restoring the ties between the husband and God as well as between the husband and wife. This can only be accomplished through prayer. In answer God will again renew the strength of the husband to give honor to his wife, that is, to deal forgivingly, considerately, and thoughtfully.

¹⁷ *Interpretation of Peter, John, and Jude*, p. 138.

¹⁸ *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 30, “The Catholic Epistles,” p. 92.

¹⁹ *Popular Commentary, New Testament, Vol. II*, p. 531.

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(Partial listing for verses 1-7.)