



ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER
A WORD TO HUSBANDS

1 Peter 3:7

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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. (1 Peter 3: 7)

Introduction

I must tell you that I am surprised Peter includes this word to husbands. Not that husbands don't need a word like this. God knows we do! Peter knew we did as well, because Peter himself was married (1 Cor. 9:5), and therefore knew as well as anyone that husbands really need this kind of word.

I am surprised Peter includes this word to husbands because it does not fit the pattern of this passage; it's not what we would expect from the flow of the passage. This whole section of Scripture is addressed to *marginalized believers living in the midst of an unbelieving world*. Marginalized a believer, that's the key. Peter addresses the marginalized, not the empowered; those who were vulnerable in society, not those who were powerful. So, he addresses Christian citizens, not their rulers or the government (2:13-17), and he addresses marginalized servants, not their masters (2:18-25). Thus, when he turns to address wives, who were the more vulnerable in the marriage relationship, we would expect Peter to speak only to them. But he doesn't. This passage has something to say to husbands as well. Therefore, husbands, listen up: there's no getting off the hook!

"Likewise, husbands," is the way Peter begins. Likewise, what? In what way are husbands to do likewise? We see this is the same way in which Peter introduces his word to wives in 3:1: "Likewise, wives." So, wives and husbands are to do something similar; they share a common responsibility. What is this? If we look further up into Chapter 2, we see a word to servants to be subject to their masters (v. 18). But this itself points us to the key verse in this section of Scripture: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution" (v. 13). This is what not only servants and wives, but also husbands themselves are to do: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution." And in the case of a husband, one of the institutions he's to be subject to is the institution of marriage. Just as the wife has obligations to the institution of marriage, so too, *likewise*, husbands have obligations as well.

Of course, husbands seem to have an amazing way of forgetting this simple fact. Husbands, myself included, tend to be really good about remembering that our wives have obligations to the institution of marriage; that they have roles and responsibilities to fulfill. We are also remarkably discerning and very insightful about all the ways our wives can fail to fulfill those

obligations. But we somehow seem all too easily to lose sight of the fact that *we too* have obligations to fulfill.

What is a husband's obligation to the institution of marriage? How ought he to live with his wife? You can summarize this passage's answer to this question with one single word: *understanding*. "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way."

Seek To Understand Your Spouse

Husbands, we are to live with our wives in an understanding way; literally, we are to live with them 'according to knowledge.' We are to seek to understand our spouses. We are to know them; we are to understand them; we are to be experts in our spouses; we are to have earned an advanced degree in this very specific field of knowledge: the woman God has given you as a wife.

Regrettably, husbands, we find this to be one of the harder tasks of marriage: simply seeking to understand our spouses. How easy it is to fail to understand my wife. Let me count the ways: failing to recognize she is designed to beautify her environment, not make it look like a garage or shed; not appreciating the fact that she is wired to cultivate relationships by connecting emotionally, not compete with others physically; that she likes to communicate with words, not grunts or jokes or smacks on the back. Of course, you see what these all have in common: they are all examples of treating my wife as though she were just like me.

My sense is that husbands tend to confuse *familiarity* with their wives for actually *understanding* their wives. But, as the wives will gladly tell us, there is a profound difference between familiarity and understanding. Familiarity is superficial. Husbands who are only familiar with their wives may have a broad knowledge of who their spouse is, but it will not be very deep. Many husbands may be able to do quite well on the *Newlywed Game*, successfully describing your first kiss, or your spouse's favorite food, or your worst fight, or her favorite high school teacher. But that is very different than actually understanding your wife.

Let me ask you, husbands, how well do you understand your wives? Which of the following questions would you be able to answer honestly and accurately: What is your wife's greatest insecurity? What is the one thing she would change about you and your marriage? Where is she currently struggling the most spiritually? What is she regularly praying for? These are good diagnostic questions that help reveal whether we are just familiar with our wives or actually understand them. Let me commend them to you to discuss with your wife as you seek to understand her.

I have in my mind a wonderful picture of a husband who understands his wife. For my mother-in-law's fiftieth birthday, her family threw her a surprise party. Everyone gathered at her friend's house for the big surprise. In order not to spoil the surprise, my father-in-law blindfolded her and then drove her to the house where the guests had gathered. He then guided her up the sidewalk, through the front door, and into the entryway, where all the guests could see her. It was a large crowd, eighty to a hundred people, and they were all ready to shout, "Surprise!" But before they could, my father-in-law had to remove the blindfold. It was only natural for him to simply grab the blindfold on both sides of her head and lift it up. In fact, this was just what he began to do . . . until he realized that if he did, it would no doubt completely ruin her hair-do for the rest of the night! So, instead, he very gracefully and patiently untied the knot and removed the blindfold another way.

Now, this in itself might not seem like much to you. I suspect my father-in-law would have no recollection of having done this, nor would probably anyone else who watched him do it. But it is a powerful picture of a husband who lives with his wife with understanding; a husband who despite his natural tendencies or external pressures from others, nevertheless understands his wife; a husband who embodies the truth of this text: “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way.”

Affirm Her Difference – Don’t Exploit It

Of course, there are a thousand ways in which a husband can seek to understand his spouse or live with her in an understanding way. But let me tell you what may be the most important way: *by affirming her difference—not exploiting it*. This is the second challenge we find in Peter’s word to husbands: “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, *showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel*.”

Now, I must confess that whenever I hear this language about the woman being the ‘weaker vessel,’ my mind instantly goes back to three different labor and delivery rooms, where my own ‘weaker vessel’ gave birth to our three eight-plus pound babies. Mind you, two of them she delivered without any pain medication whatsoever; and the first, our son Ezra, took no less than twenty-four hours to deliver, including four or five hours of that really crazy stuff at the end, the stuff you as a husband hope and pray you never see again for the rest of your life! So, you understand, then, that as I think about watching my wife persevere through all three deliveries, and as I remember holding her hand for *my own comfort* as much as for hers, I have a hard time not believing that I am actually the weaker of the two vessels.

What, then, does Peter mean in telling husbands they are to honor the woman as the weaker vessel? At root, what he is doing is making a simple observation about biology: by and large, men are both bigger and stronger than women. I don’t think anyone would object to that statement. Every child gets this. Most men can bench press more than women, or lift a heavier piece of luggage, or more easily open a tight lid on a jar. This is at root what Peter means with this expression.

But it’s really more significant than mere biology. Here’s why: Because human societies have been built around this basic biological difference between men and women. Because men are bigger and stronger, they have historically almost always held the keys to power in any society: social, political and economic power. Who was going to protect the tribe from the neighboring tribe? The men would. Who was going to therefore serve as the leaders? The men would. And who was going to have the right to control the resources or the money? The men would.

So, you see, human societies reflect this basic difference between men and women. But here is the problem: *Fallen human societies, those that are infected by sin, do not just reflect this difference, they exploit it*. Ever since our first parents, Adam and Eve, sinned and fell, the relationship between man and woman has been fraught with strife and hostility. Remember what God said to Eve in the Garden, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall *rule* over you” (Gen. 3:16). Thus, what began as a basic biological fact—that the man is stronger than the woman—has been the source of untold pain and suffering on the part of the woman. For the Adam in every man is constantly tempted to use his power to dominate the Eve in every woman. And history is littered with ten thousand ugly expressions of the stronger vessel’s

exploitation of the weaker vessel: from domestic violence to the porn industry, from rape to the withholding civil rights, from human trafficking to continued inequality in the marketplace.

In the world, therefore, the stronger vessel dominates and exploits the weaker. It was true in the first-century; it's still true even in the twenty-first century. Even in our modern Western societies, with all of our restraints and equalizing forces, the exploitation of women by men is still found everywhere. Take domestic violence as an example. Did you know the Department of Justice reports that approximately 1.3 million women are physically assaulted by an intimate partner annually in the United States; or that in the year 2000, the number of women killed by an intimate partner was 1,247?

Yet in Christ Jesus all of this has been decisively overturned. By submitting to Christ and by finding our satisfaction in him by faith, men are liberated from the need to dominate women, to use them for their own selfish ends. Thus, as Christ demonstrated with his own life, we are not to honor the strong because they are strong and despise the weak because they're weak. Instead, in Christ we are, as Peter says, to *honor* the weaker vessel. Jesus Christ did not use his power to dominate and oppress; he used it to serve and bless. "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). So, too, men, husbands, in particular, who are in Christ, we are to use our power to serve and bless—not exploit and dominate.

This is what this passage calls husbands to do: "honor the woman as the weaker vessel." When you argue, do not take advantage of the fact that your wife is physically not as forceful as you; when you debate family finances, do not use to your advantage the fact that she probably does not have the same earning power as you, if any at all; or when you clash over parenting approaches, do not demean her by critiquing the fact that she leans toward patience and nurture over force and fear. Instead, seek to affirm her difference.

How do you do this? You honor your wife, first, *by thinking well* of your wife; thus rejecting all forms of arrogance or condescension toward her as a woman. No machismo attitudes toward women! You do this, secondly, *by speaking well* of your wife, both to her and about her to others. Men, those little demeaning comments under your breath or the crass female jokes with friends do not honor women and certainly do not honor wives. You do this, thirdly, *by doing well* to her: that is, serving her with your strength, not exploiting her because of her difference.

Two Very Good Reasons Why

At this point, some of the husbands who are feeling the heat of this passage may like a little incentive or motivation. This passage provides us as husbands with two very good reasons why we ought to live with our wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel.

The first reason is simply that even though you are different in physical makeup, God nevertheless treats you just the same in salvation. Women are, as Peter says, "heirs with us of the grace of life." While politically or economically speaking first-century wives were at a severe disadvantage compared to their husbands, in the sight of God they shared the exact same title to eternal life as that of any man. In the eyes of the world, wives are at a disadvantage; in the eyes of God, wives are on perfectly equal footing. There is a fundamental equality at the foot of the cross. Jesus does not give special preference to men over women. He is not impressed that

you run faster or throw a ball farther or make more money than your wife. For in Christ Jesus, there is neither male nor female; we are all one in him. Coheirs with Christ, equal at the foot of the cross, granted the exact same access to the only privilege that really matters: and that is the grace of eternal life purchased for you at the cross.

The second reason is more blunt and straightforward. Husbands, if you do not honor your wife, you will be cut off from communion with God. It was the great goal of the gospel to bring us into right relationship with God. Jesus Christ took on human flesh, died a criminal's death on the cross, and there bore your sins and mine, that we might be justified before God and enjoy free and full communion with him forever and ever. As Peter tells us: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (3:18). Yet, as this passage reminds us, we can sabotage our communion with God by living a lousy life with our wife. You see what this verse says: "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel . . . so that your prayers may not be hindered."

I can imagine noting worse than having my prayers hindered and not be heard. Prayer is essential to the Christian life; we need prayer. It is with prayer that we offer adoration and worship to God. It is with prayer that we seek provision and blessing from God. It is with prayer that we seek to increase our fruitfulness in life and impact in the lives of others. Prayer is the voice of faith; prayer is the way to glory; prayer is the doorway into God's presence.

But, husbands, hear this: our prayers can be blocked, if we fail to live with our wives in an understanding way. If that is the case, we may be uttering prayers, but they will be like emails that never really leave your computer because you have been disconnected from the server. You said the prayer; you even pressed the send button; but the prayer doesn't go anywhere. It is blocked; it is hindered. As a result, your communion with God in and through prayer is cut off.

Recognize, then, husbands how seriously God takes your relationship with your wife; he is not messing around. Nor should we. Also, recognize that a lack of spiritual vitality in your own life may be directly related to the way you treat your wife. If you are feeling flat spiritually, or even taken a downward turn, then take a sober look at how you are treating the spouse God has given you.

Conclusion

These past two weeks we have been looking at how husbands and wives ought to relate to one another. Last week we consider the call for believing wives of unbelieving husbands to engage in a bit of missional living in order to win their husbands without a word. Today's passage, in turn, calls husbands to follow in the footsteps of Jesus by considering the needs of their wives more important than their own. Husbands, you realize the stakes are high. We ought to seek to understand our spouse so that our communion with God will not be cut off. It is that simple.

Let me conclude with a couple of challenges to husbands, and then an observation for the rest of us.

First, husbands, some of you may have some repenting to do. You have not been living with your wife in an understanding way, and she knows it and, if you are honest, you know it too.

And it needs to stop; you need to repent. You need to sit down with her, look her in the eye, and say, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

Second, husbands, pray with your wives. This passage implies that you pray with your wives. Yet it is astonishing how seldom we as husbands actually pray with our wives. Why is that? One of the reasons may be that we are simply out of step spiritually with our wives. Oh but how critical this is!

Third, husbands, find simple yet significant ways to honor your wives. I know a pastor friend who has for many years been in the habit of writing a word of affirmation to his wife on 3 X 5 cards, and he does this every single day. His wife has shoe boxes full of these cards, simple yet significant ways he has sought to honor his wife. Also, husbands and dads, realize that when a husband honors his wife, his children will learn to honor their mother. Disrespect from dad is contagious. Kids pick up on this. So, dads, honor your wives; your wife deserves that from you and your kids need that from you.

Fourth, husbands and men, do not confuse being understanding and honoring your wife with being soft or taking the man out of men. This is not a call for the emasculation of masculinity. No, you should stay wild and fierce and passionate and courageous. But let this strength, this power, come fully under the control of the only One who knows what to do with you. Or, as one writer has put it: "Yes, a man is a dangerous thing. So is a scalpel. It can wound or it can save your life. You don't make it safe by making it dull; you put it in the hands of someone who knows what he's doing."¹ That is the challenge to every man in the room today: to recognize the inherent strength God has given to you and put yourself in the hands of someone, the only One, who knows what to do with you: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, an observation for the rest of us. It's this: our lives impact our prayers. Of course, I think we all realize how prayer can impact our lives; but the reverse is also true, though often not appreciated. Prayer is not magic. We sometimes slip into thinking it is. It is not an incantation. You pray, ask for stuff from God, and think that God automatically hears you. Not necessarily. As we have seen, husbands can hinder their prayers by failing to honor our wives. But, for the rest of us, we as Christians can kill our prayer life by failing to live in unity together. "For," as Peter reminds us by quoting Psalm 34 a few verses later, "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" (3:12). Or we can stymie our prayers if we lack self-control and sober-mindedness (4:7). On the other hand, as James reminds us: "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (5:16). A consistent life of faith will cause our prayers to be unleashed with power and great effectiveness.

May each one of us, then, seek to live by faith in Christ, resting in his provision and rejoicing in the grace of life, honoring everyone, and so proclaiming the excellencies of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Amen.

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¹ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, p. 83.