

“Looking Down On Jesus”

Eighth in a series on Peter's First Letter

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1st Peter 3:1-7

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In the same way, wives, be subject to your husbands, so that even if some of them disobey the word, they may be won, without a word, through the behaviour of their wives, as they pay close attention to your holy and reverent way of life.

Do not adorn yourselves externally: elaborate hairdressing, gold jewellery, fine clothes. Rather, may your adornment be the hidden person of the heart, the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. That is very precious to God.

That is how the holy women of old, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being subject to their husbands. Take Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him 'master'. You are her children if you do good things and have no fear of intimidation.

In the same way, husbands, think out how to live with your wives. Yes, they are weaker vessels than you, but they deserve honour. They are heirs of the gracious gift of life, just the same as you. That way, nothing will obstruct your prayers.

My translation, using N. T. Wright's *Kingdom New Testament* and various commentaries.

I was chatting with a woman, one of you, about our worship. She's been married longer than I've been alive. I mentioned: "This week we're looking at 'Wives, be subject to your husbands.'" "Not a chance," she spat out. Amen, sister!

"Wives, be subject to your husbands." It's been used to justify male domination, even spousal abuse. Today we're celebrating diversity in families.¹ This passage reinforces a harmful understanding of family.

We could skip over and try to ignore teachings like this. But they won't go away. Others will pick them up and use them to cause harm. I think it's better to be like Jacob when

¹ In our congregation it is Pride Sunday.

he wrestled with God.² We need to wrestle with these. We might be wounded along the way. God will give blessing, even in the battling.

What can we wrestle from this?

II

In their culture, a family was ruled by the senior male (the *pater familias*). He had authority over everyone in the household: his children, any grandchildren, enslaved persons, others living under his roof, and his wife. He was expected to build his wealth, raise children to be good citizens, regulate everyone's morality and punish wrongdoing, and ensure the gods were properly worshipped. Everyone in the household was subject to him.³

A wife had authority over the children, enslaved, and others, but she was always subject to her husband. Why?

(Here's what *they* thought. Don't shoot the minister!) *They believed . . . women are by nature inferior to men. A woman cannot reason. Her emotions rule her. Left to her own, she will make poor decisions, be immoral, wicked, out of control, and not trustworthy. She needs a strong man to rule her.*⁴

That's painful. Lies. Hateful. Dehumanizing. It's still around. It causes real harm. Many of you have experienced it.

Peter writes to women living under this. "*Wives, be subject to your husbands.*" They know that. They already have to. Can it be anything different?

Let's hope.

III

There is this small group. It's attracting people from all walks of life, and especially those who are poor, enslaved, and women. Women are giving leadership alongside

² Genesis 32:24-32.

³ See Wikipedia contributors, "New Testament household code," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=New_Testament_household_code&oldid=995916031 (accessed June 9, 2021) and "Pater familias," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Pater_familias&oldid=1021893447 (accessed June 9, 2021).

⁴ Paul Achtemeier, quoted in Dennis R. Edwards, 1 Peter, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2017), 86 n. 1.

men. They all say they belong to Jesus their King and are loyal to him. He's their God. They worship him.

A *pater familias* discovers his wife is part of this group. How might he react?

She's got friends whom he does not know; she's not supposed to. She's worshipping a god her husband does not know; she's not supposed to. He's suspicious. He'll watch her closely. *"Is she attacking my authority? Is she undermining me? Can I trust her? Should I punish her?"* He has all the power over her. She is in danger.⁵

Once I get what's going on behind this letter, Peter's message starts looking like a defensive strategy. *Wives, be subject to your husbands. Avoid conflict with them. Faithfully follow Jesus, but if at all possible, do not be seen to be undermining your husband's authority.*⁶

He calls women *"the weaker vessel."* I've always winced at that. But now I think Peter is just getting at the power dynamic. Women were weaker: legally, socially, often physically.⁷ Where there is oppression and violence — in a society, in a home — people who are "weaker" learn to be wise and strategic, to get by and stay safe. Peter is saying: *Be wise, be strategic, because your husband will be watching you closely.*⁸

IV

He is watching you closely! So be even more strategic. For your husband, be like Jesus.

Remember, the husband opposes the Jesus movement. Peter says he *"disobeys the word,"* the good news of Jesus.⁹ She might win him over to the faith, without saying a word. *Influence by your example. Show him the holy and reverent way you are living. Show him Jesus.*

Peter talks about how she dresses. This has been misused by men to tell women how they should look. That's what is happening to these wives, by their culture. How she

⁵ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 203.

⁶ Peter focuses most of his attention on Christian wives whose husbands are not believers. That itself is remarkable. Social instructions of the time were usually addressed to the dominant person in the relationship (husbands, not wives; parents, not children; masters, not those enslaved). The dominant party was assumed to be the only one with moral agency. See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco, CA: Harper One, 1996), 65-65.

⁷ Edwards, 133.

⁸ Edwards, 129.

⁹ See 1st Peter 1:23, 25.

looks says who she is.¹⁰ (Have we changed that much?)

Peter undermines that. He knows that what matters to God is the person, not the performance.¹¹ Dressing up for her husband is what's expected. Not what matters.

It's how she lives: how she is with others in the household, including those over whom she has authority; how she is with neighbours; how she is with her husband. This will show him the "*hidden person of the heart*." Unlike outside beauty, it cannot be bought now that shops are open.¹² This inner-beauty won't fade away.

She belongs to Jesus. She is filled with the Holy Spirit. So she will show "*a gentle and quiet spirit*." Don't worry guys, that's not only for women. Quiet: that's a person's spirit in whom God will dwell.¹³ Gentle: that's a person to whom God's kingdom will be given.¹⁴ That's Jesus.¹⁵

Showing him Jesus can win her husband over. That's the deeper strategy Peter is sketching out.¹⁶

V

He does give some attention to Christian husbands, the *patres familias*. With their wives these husbands share in the same salvation, the gracious gift of God in Jesus Christ. These men are being shaped by Jesus into a new way of living. How does this change their relationship?

Listen to what Canadian theologian Douglas Harink says about this:

The authoritarian husband or domineering male fundamentally fails to understand God and the gospel — so much so that his prayers, which

¹⁰ Joel B. Green writes, ""To a degree difficult to fathom today, a person was her clothing." Quoted in Edwards, 131.

¹¹ "God doesn't look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart." 1st Samuel 16:7 (CEB).

¹² This weekend, the pandemic restrictions on in-person shopping were partially lifted.

¹³ Isaiah 62:5.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:5.

¹⁵ Matthew 11:29.

¹⁶ I have not discussed vv. 5-6, in which Peter refers to "holy women" from long ago. He uses Sarah in particular as an example. In Jewish tradition, Sarah was a model of a woman of virtue. Her husband Abraham, as a man, had greater status in her society. That's how she addressed him, as her "lord" (or "master.") Sarah herself was addressed by a similar title by someone who was of inferior status to her, Hagar who was enslaved. See Edwards, 132.

*depend from beginning to end on God's grace, may also be 'hindered' (3:7). For how can he call upon the grace of God when he refuses to acknowledge that he is a sharer in that grace with women?*¹⁷

I think wrestling with this passage, and all troubling teachings of Scripture, is fruitful. We might discover that they don't really say what we first think. What Peter says, primarily to wives but also husbands, cuts through the stereotypes and expectations of his time.

Peter's message cuts through ours too.

VI

I notice a pattern.¹⁸

Peter talks to husbands. He says they should act "*in the same way*" as their wives. He talks to wives, and says they should act "*in the same way*" as their slaves.

We'd expect the hierarchy of examples to flow upward. Play basketball? Learn from Mike.¹⁹ Succeed in business? Learn from people like Anita Roddick and Draymond John.²⁰ Make movies? Learn from Bong Joon-ho.²¹ Teach math. Learn from my friend Deb Jagger from Elmira, one of the best math teachers in Canada.²²

Peter reverses that. Learn by looking down society's hierarchy.

Husbands, look to your wives to teach you. Wives, look to your slaves to teach you. Enslaved people, look to . . . remember?

Jesus.

Those with more power need to learn about following Jesus from those with less power.

Jesus experts are those whom our world has pushed out, ostracized, judged,

¹⁷ Douglas Harink, 1 & 2 Peter, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos, 2009), 89.

¹⁸ Edwards, 133.

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Be_Like_Mike

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita_Roddick and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daymond_John.

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bong_Joon-ho

²² ca.sports.yahoo.com/news/knowledgehook-impact-awards-educators-awarded-192100292.html

neglected, denounced, oppressed, and violated. When God the Son came among us, he chose to be one of them.

Who is teaching me about following Jesus these days?

Queer Christians. Many have endured profoundly un-Christian treatment from their churches. They've had every reason to turn away. Many have. But some have persisted. They love Jesus, often despite his people. I need to learn from them.

Indigenous Christians. In a couple weeks, I hope Rev. Dr. Ray Aldred can join us with a pre-recorded sermon. He is Cree, from Treaty 8 territory in Alberta. Currently he is academic dean at the Vancouver School of Theology. I need Ray to teach me about following Jesus.

This is Jesus' pattern, the "looking downward" glory of his cross. And to you he says, "Follow me."

Amen.