

Peter's First Epistle Chapter 3

Let us first read the scripture that is before us.

“Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear. Do not let your adornment be merely outward--arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel--rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror. Likewise, Husbands, dwell with them with understanding, giving honour to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered. Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tender-hearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. For “He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil. “And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed.” And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us--baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.”

It is worth remembering that the epistles of Peter were written to the believers scattered abroad and are in general terms as opposed to the majority of the epistles in the New Testament that are

written specifically to the assemblies in particular areas, often to address specific needs or situations. At the very heart of his writings is the theme of shepherding the people of God. They are pastoral in their essence and how appropriate this is when we remember the Lord's challenge to Peter that he should "feed" or "shepherd" the sheep and lambs of Christ (see John 21: 15-17).

So we come to the chapter before us today and straight away we are faced with something that seems so out of line with what we see in our society today, the matter of subjection. I should make a few points in general before we think about this specifically. Every culture has its own views and beliefs and in the western world we are very much taught from a young age to stand up for our rights and that our own personal views are the most important. While it is important for us to know what we think and believe, it is so easy for us to lose the perspective that we still need to take other people's views into account and not be selfish in thinking it is all about us. In this area it is, therefore, very difficult not to be affected by the culture of the day and sentiments around us. These things can change so frequently and vary depending on where and when we live.

Just think for a minute what things were like in Rome back in the day when the apostle Paul was writing his epistle to them. Yet he instructs them in chapter 12 of Romans not to be conformed to the views and opinions around them but rather be transformed by the renewing of their minds to a totally different set of values. I love this thought that rather than just mould into something over time and be like everyone else, we can make a conscious decision to be, do and think something different. Christianity is contrary to the views of this world in so many different ways, even at the very basic level in that so many people now say there is no God and we are all just here and living as a part of some huge accident in the universe. We should therefore not be surprised when the teachings of Christ call on us to have contrary views in many other areas. These are contrary views that the Spirit of God calls us to in order that we can be pleasing to God in all our ways and in so doing have blessing and fulfilment in life. Sometimes we can think that hard things are somehow there to spoil our enjoyment of life or keep us in line, how different to the truth!

With these thoughts in mind, then, we can go into our chapter and view these first few verses in a new light. The previous chapter talks about other relationships where we need to be submissive and this challenges us all in different ways. Now we get into the most important and special relationship of all, the marriage bond. We have to keep in mind that this relationship was God's idea right at the beginning of creation. He said that it was not good that a man should be alone and He created woman from and for man. Whether we understand this or not is irrelevant; we are called as Christians to believe it. Then when we do and seek to work it out, as we said earlier, it will bring the greatest happiness and fulfilment in life and glory to God.

We are reminded in Ephesians chapter 5 that the marriage of a husband and wife is a picture of Christ and His church and we do well to consider such verses that we have before us today with this picture in mind. In this context then of being in subjection there is no thought of inequality. Perhaps a good example would be of two business partners with an equal share in the business but who for some reason, perhaps experience or technical expertise, have decided that one should have the final say when there is a difference of opinion. They are still equal but one agrees to submit to the other. This being adhered to and worked out will make for a very happy and worthwhile partnership. However, as in marriage, if this agreement is taken advantage of, used in a way to put the other down or just simply ignored by the other partner then problems will arise. If we think again about the picture in Ephesians it is completely out of step for the Church not to submit to Christ her head.

This attitude of heart then in the Christian wife will be so powerful that even if her husband does not believe the word he will be so affected by the conduct of his wife that he may well be won over to Christ without even a word being spoken. Peter then, in verses 2, 3 and 4, compares the attitude of the heart with the outward things that can be seen; wearing of gold, fancy hairstyles and lovely clothes. How different this is to our own day when there is very much the view put forward

that outward appearance is all that matters! It would appear from Peter's comments in verse 5 that it was the same in his day as he refers back to former days and mentions Sarah. He then commends Sarah for the way she obeyed her husband. We do well to remember that Abraham made mistakes but Sarah carried out her responsibility in line with what God would want. In following the example of Sarah and in doing good, the Christian wife can then have this calm confidence in God. What a contrast this is to the person who is only concerned with outward appearance and the uncertainty and disappointment that this may bring as we are affected by the ageing process. In verse 4 we get this wonderful thought of the incorruptible beauty of the hidden person of the heart which is precious in the sight of God.

Then when we come to verse 7 we get the husband's responsibility in this relationship. It is important always to remember this as I have often noticed that these principles do not work if it is one-sided. I often also notice that when these verses are criticised it is because only one side is quoted. So as husbands we are called upon to recognise that we are different and give honour to our wives. In doing this we will live together in the fullness of the grace of life and our prayers will not be hindered. In these days of so many marriage problems all around, surely there can be no better situation to work towards than this principle. We should always follow the maker's instructions when we buy something. Well, it appeals to me that this is the Maker's instruction in respect of the most important aspect of our lives so we do well to follow this likewise. This requires us to be governed in our thoughts by Christian knowledge, not driven by our feelings or any human passion.

In verses 8 to 12, we then see a similar attitude of mind that then needs to be shown to a far wider circle than between husbands and wives. Even before we think about this, we do need to challenge ourselves in two respects. If we cannot show these attitudes of love and grace to those we are closest to, how will we ever show them to others, and if we are showing them to others but do not demonstrate them behind closed doors then we are very hypocritical. Both sides need to be consistent. We are to be a blessing to all those with whom we come in contact by both our attitudes and our speech. So if a gracious, gentle, humble spirit is that which is true of us, then this should surely come out in our speech and interactions with everyone with whom we come in contact. It would then be inconsistent if we were to reply with a wrong attitude to someone who says something in a wrong manner to us, as Peter puts: "We are not to return evil for evil or reviling for reviling." Tit for tat is not a Christian principle and should not be seen among us. We are blessed of God and should be a blessing to all in return.

It is not so long ago that we have seen a new government come into place and this followed a bruising election campaign. As Christians, we are under God's government. This will be seen on earth in a day to come but its principles should be evident in the Church now and it is for this reason that Peter reminds his readers of the words from Psalm 34 in verses 10 to 12 of this chapter. Although the psalmist was writing at a time when they were under law and we are now under grace, it is clear from Peter's writing that the government of God still applies and therefore what we say and think will have an impact on the degree to which we can enjoy the goodness and blessing of God. Perhaps many of the disagreeable events of our life are the result of our own disagreeableness. If we want to reap good then perhaps we need to sow more good. I do not recall many examples of this in the recent election campaign!

It is worth noting at this point as we think about Peter referring to the government of God that this would refer back to the book of Deuteronomy. In that book, Israel was warned of the consequences of disobedience to God's law and the reward of obedience. Peter also refers to election in chapter 1 and this would take us to Genesis as the book of election. In Genesis we can see how God chose Abel and Seth and not Cain, Shem and not Ham, Abram not Nahor, Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau, Joseph and not Reuben, Ephraim and not Manasseh. So in verse 2 of chapter 1 we are told that as Christians we are God's elect.

Exodus is the book of redemption and Peter refers to this further on in chapter 1 when he details how we are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. From the end of chapter 1 into chapter 2, he tells us about the priesthood of all believers and we cannot help but think of the book of Leviticus as that which details all that appertained to the priestly service of the Old Testament both in terms of the directions for the sacrifice and suitability of the priests who were to administer them.

The book of Numbers documents the wilderness journey of the children of Israel as they moved towards the promised land with all their problems and trials and the lessons they learned from them. In chapter 2 verse 11 Peter refers to the believers as sojourners and pilgrims just like the children of Israel were and he then goes on to give us guidance for the “wilderness” journey which takes us right up to the verses we have just considered in chapter 3. How wonderful it is then when the Holy Spirit can take those things written by Moses so long before and bring them to bear in New Testament writings!

Verses 13 through to 17 can perhaps be entitled “Suffering for right and wrong”. Peter is making it very clear that as believers we should never suffer for wrongdoing and that our good conduct both in attitude and works should be such that surely nobody would want to harm us. However, even if they do, it is we who are blessed. I recall one great Christian of many years ago after his house had been broken into and many of his goods stolen, commenting that he was still grateful to be the person who had been robbed rather than the person who had carried out such a thing! We should always remember Paul’s words in chapter 10 of Hebrews, part of verse 34 reads “and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven”.

By ensuring that the Lord has that first place in our hearts, we will not be troubled by these things or people who may go against us. This would be the thought of “sanctify” in verse 15, not to make holy as it often means but more to set apart. The Lord must be set apart in His rightful place of glory, honour, supremacy and authority. If we are then showing out these characteristics, some will ask, why? Peter goes on to encourage the believers always to be able to give an answer, a defence to that hope that is in us. What a testimony that should render in a world where these things are in the main not seen! When done in the right manner, as Peter puts it, with meekness and fear with a good conscience, it should make those who wrong us unjustly to be ashamed. Peter finishes this small section then with the conclusion that if we are going to suffer in the will of God, then better to suffer for doing good than doing evil.

As we go into verse 18, Peter then takes us from thinking about the sufferings that we might encounter on account of our doing good to the greatest example of suffering on account of good that this world has ever seen, that is the substitutional sufferings of Christ on the cross of Calvary. Substitutional atonement is the cornerstone of Christianity and at the very heart of our blessing. Peter sums up this thought quite simply by exclaiming “the just for the unjust”. He then further explains the object and purpose of this great “substitution”, that Christ might bring us to God. It means we can be entirely confident in God’s presence because we are completely worthy and fit to be there. It does not rely on our knowledge or obedience, but simply by accepting our position as a sinner before God, repenting of that sin and acceptance of Christ’s work. We are no more worthy of this position after we have been a Christian for many years as we are the very moment we believe. The repentant thief who witnessed the suffering and death of Christ first hand would be the example of this. That very day he was promised he would be in heaven with his Lord!

The end of verse 18 makes it clear that Christ was put to death then rose again in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. It was by that same Spirit that Christ preached through Noah in the days before the flood and only eight people responded and were preserved from God’s judgement. Those who refused this testimony of Noah are now in hades. In the same way, the Gospel of grace will only be available for a set time and once Christ returns that opportunity to be saved will have gone, just

as in the days of Noah, the opportunity of salvation had gone when God shut the door of the ark. Peter refers in chapter 1 verse 11 to the Spirit of Christ speaking through the Old Testament prophets at various times and here he is being more specific in naming Noah.

We then get another picture, an antitype, as Peter puts it. A type is usually something that comes before which is a picture of something still to come. Here we have the opposite, something coming which is a picture of something which has already happened. It is a simple picture in baptism which speaks of going into death then coming up out of the water into newness of life. We must be very clear with this, however, that nothing eternal is achieved in baptism. There is no mystical power in the water. It is simply an outward picture to demonstrate that which should have happened inwardly when a person accepted Christ as Saviour and became a new creation. We walk in newness of life the moment we trust in the Lord for salvation and baptism is just a sign that represents this. Hence in New Testament days, it was something that immediately followed conversion. Our Lord who was raised from the dead has now gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, where all things are now in subjection to Him. It is in this place that our hearts can now be lifted to praise and worship Him.

Thank you for listening to the talk number T1136 on Peter's First Epistle chapter 3 and I trust that it will be an encouragement to us all.

New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated

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