

Prayer

Gracious Lord, You love us and long to supply what we need to live according to Your will. May we never turn away from any help or blessing You would give; Your sustenance, Your guidance, Your love, Your friendship and Your spiritual gifts. May we then become worthy ambassadors for Your Kingdom, wherever we are, and wherever we go; to Your Praise and Glory; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: the sick in mind

Pray for people who care for the sick in mind. May they be strengthened to do their difficult work and be able to show compassion both for those for whom they care and their families.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those whose jobs are under threat at this time*
- *Praise God for church fellowship*
- *Give thanks for the work of teachers in schools and colleges*

Meditation

Time is a precious commodity;

Built into creation for us to use by God, our Lord and Creator:

We give our time to You, Lord God;

Time to think, to pray, to read and also to do Your will:

We give our time to those we love;

Time to share the precious gifts of love and deep commitment:

We give our time to neighbours and friends;

Time to give, receive and grow in costly care and friendship:

We give our time to daily work;

Time to witness to the Kingdom through everything we do:

We give our time to our personal needs;

Time to take our Sabbath rest, according to Your Word:

Time is a precious gift of God;

We use it now as best we can; it will not last forever!

Bible Study - 1 Peter 3:1-4

¹ Wives, in just the same way, you must submit to your own husbands, so that if any of them have no regard for the Word they may be won over in different ways through their wives' manner of life; ² seeing the pure and respectful way you live, ³ which is not found externally in the worldliness of braiding hair and wearing of expensive jewellery or the wearing of fine clothes, ⁴ but in the imperishable quality of a gentle and peaceful spirit (that secret treasure of a husband's heart), which is very precious to God.

Review

This passage of scripture has been a focus of dispute for many years. Some believe it gives scriptural justification for the submission of women to men, and others find within it a picture of the 'perfect woman' to which they aspire and live in guilt because they cannot conform to it. Both are unhelpful interpretations of a scripture which needs a little more care for us to see its powerful truths.

Peter had just spoken to his congregation of converts who worked in service and slavery about how their unjust suffering was powerfully evocative of the sufferings of Christ, and he explained in emotive terms the privilege of sharing in Christ's work. This message is not common today because most people do not live with the kind of suffering experienced by slaves or servants of the 1st century. When we come to this passage, Peter begins by saying 'in just the same way ...' before talking about the subjection of wives to husbands. At the very least, this suggests that the subjection of women to men is a suffering as unjust as that of slavery!

Some commentators have tried hard to separate the two subjects, and because they are never read side by side (being each side of a chapter break), few people spot the connection. Nevertheless, we must connect the two and it seems arrogant that anyone might suggest that this passage advocates the subjection of women to men in marriage any more than Peter advocates the practice of slavery! Peter instructs the women to whom he spoke to accept the subjection they experienced, just as he told the slaves and servants to accept their servitude (2:11-25).

Peter's words 'wives ... you must submit to your husbands' (3:1) were therefore not intended to reflect normal Christian married life, because he immediately addressed the primary concern of the women in his congregation. He spoke about how to witness to faith in a marriage where the man had no interest in the Gospel; having 'no regard for the Word'. He told the women to give testimony to the Gospel by appealing to something to which a man would respond, because it is 'a secret treasure of a husband's heart' (3:4). You will find that my translation here is different from most Bibles, but you will see a full justification of this in my notes below, and I firmly believe this to be close to the original Greek.

What is this 'secret treasure' which will win over a man? Peter perceptively states that what most men want from their wives is not a show of personal obsession, finery and fashion (4:3), but a 'pure and respectful' manner, and 'the imperishable quality of a gentle and peaceful spirit' (3:4). The Lord of course knows that He has not made all women in this mould, but he does know that amongst other personal needs, most men appreciate a wife who gives them appropriate respect and has these qualities, rather than one who flaunts money, power, sex or fashion. So the qualities of purity, respectfulness and a peaceful spirit are ones to which a woman should aspire if she wishes to please her husband. Now, not all life for women should be about trying to please their husbands; however, our passage is indeed about this because it advises Christian woman how to be a witness to non-Christian husbands, and it remains good advice for such circumstances.

It is my sincere hope that women who read this will accept that this passage of scripture does not advocate a unilateral submission of women to their husbands (for more about this, read my recent notes on Ephesians 5:21-24), and neither does it tell women to abandon make up and fashion. It does give wise advice about how a woman might win over a non-believing husband; though Peter does add that God is pleased by those who have a gentle and peaceful spirit (3:4); and if asked, I reckon Peter would have said something similar to men, as well, because we will certainly find such advice elsewhere in scripture.

Going Deeper

You may not have read or heard this passage expounded in this way before, so I strongly suggest you explore the matter further, simply because much misunderstanding has been generated in the church through casual interpretations of this and other texts. It does not take much careful study to find a peaceful, reasonable and equitable way of interpreting scripture such as this.

Notes on the text and translation

V1 *The normal translation of the second half of this verse is this '... submit to your own husbands, so that even if they do not obey the Word, they may be won over without a word by the conduct of their wives'. This suggests that the role of women is to try to win their husbands without speaking about the faith. However, this is not what*

the Greek necessarily means. It is a quite complex issue, but Peter's expression 'anew logos' means 'without a word' or 'without the Word', and could well suggest that Peter simply means that they can be won over outside of the normal means of evangelism and preaching of the Word, or as I have translated it 'in different ways'.

- V2 *'Seeing the pure and respectful way you live.' Peter has switched back from speaking about the wives generally to speaking to his listeners directly.*
- V3 *The literal translation of this verse is this 'which is not the outside worldly life of braiding hair ...' I have had to add the word 'found' (which is implied in the Greek) in order to make the sentence meaningful in English*
- V4 *This verse is not easy to translate because of one phrase at the beginning of the Greek sentence which is translated literally 'the secret of a man's (or husband's) heart'. Most translators take this to refer not to 'a man', but to the women being spoken about at this point, and they translate this 'the hidden person of the heart', which suggests that a woman is a good witness to her husband if she keeps herself to herself, and I do not believe this to be what Peter has in mind! I have resolved this in a different way which you will not find in any other translation, by suggesting that it is a comment 'in parenthesis' which refers to the non-believing husband. When read like this, it opens up a whole new angle on the last verse – see text of study. (Note, there are no parenthesis in Greek for us to know for sure that this was intended, and so it is quite normal for a translator to assume parenthesis).*

You may wonder why I have separated these four verses from the next four, which continue this theme by illustrating the witness of women such as Sarah, and then speaking of the role of men in marriage, particularly Christian men. The reason for this is to enable us to examine the issues carefully, and certainly, today's study goes hand in hand with what come next, and our next study will refer back to this. Great damage can be done in the interpretation of these scriptures if they are hurried and we do not take the opportunity to dwell on them.

At this point, I suggest reading the passage again, being careful to read it according to the punctuation I have placed in the text, rather than 'verse by verse'. The structure of the verses is very unhelpful to our understanding of the text. The whole passage is in fact one sentence, which is split at the end of verse 2.

'Wives, submit to your husbands ...' (3:1)

Peter accepted the social order of his own day which was that women had to accept a secondary and 'subject' role to men both in society and in marriage, just as servants and slaves endured unjust suffering within the life of service. Neither were reasons in Peter's mind for rebellion or social upheaval, they simply reflected the sufferings of Christ (2:22f.). However, the injustice of these social norms suggests that Christians of later years have been right in combating slavery, bonded servitude, and also the inequality of women. Peter's advice still resonates with us today at two levels.

Firstly, his general principle is that whatever the bondage you experience, if you can see in it a reflection of the sufferings of Christ, then you can rise above it and know that your life and future in Christ will bring freedom; freedom of spirit in this life, and total freedom in eternity. Only at certain special moments in history have individuals been empowered by God to bring about social change which has removed a bondage such as slavery or the inequality of women in the eyes of government and the law. We should never forget that some live in bondage today, such as financial bondage and poverty in a fiscal (to do with money) and material world, or the political bondage of dictatorship. The Kingdom of God is indeed a revolutionary body, but Peter's guidance here is that its ability to change society is more peaceful and gracious (though powerful) than violent and aggressive.

Secondly, large numbers of women find themselves in marriages in which they have to take a subservient role, irrespective of the expected equalities of many societies and cultures of today. Even in any western country, large numbers of women live in subjection because

their husbands and their culture (Muslim, Sikh, etc) require it, and despite the laws of the land, family life for them is determined by religious precedent and in some cases prejudice. Also, some Christian sects press the continued subjection of women in a wholly ungodly manner. In all such circumstances, Peter's general advice to any who may come to a real faith in the living God, remains the same.

This passage of scripture does say that where both parties of a marriage are a Christian, then a wife should submit to her husband. However, we must read this in the light of other scriptures which say the same, such as Ephesians 5:22f. in which it is abundantly clear that subjection in marriage is entirely mutual before God, though because of differences in men and women, this subjection may be expressed differently by one or the other. Indeed, when we read the rest of this section in Peter's letter (3:5-7) we will find out what Peter has to say to men in the light of this call to subjection from women.

Before moving on, you may feel that Peter's call to accept social norms is not quite the revolutionary 'stuff' of the Gospel. However, it is clear that in the days of the early church, many new Christians were proclaiming their freedoms by attempting to sweep away the social norms of the day, and when they did this, they found themselves personally compromised and alienated from the world of their day, and unable to testify to the Gospel. Both the apostles Peter and Paul regarded the Gospel as more important to the Kingdom than social campaigning on issues, and this undoubtedly comes through here.

Something special to God (3:2,3,4)

I have explained above that the translation of verse 4 is different from other versions of the Bible. However, this is the best way to understand the whole of the clause which runs from verse 2 to verse 4. The qualities of a wife which Peter speaks about are qualities of modesty, purity and gentleness, and he casts doubt on the value to a woman of various adornments, from hair braiding to jewellery and fine clothes or fashion. However, Peter may well have been speaking not to upbraid women, but to encourage them. Remember, the picture we have built up of the setting in which Peter spoke or wrote, suggests he was addressing a lowly group of converts, many of them slaves or servants. These were not people who could afford the finery of the day, but they could aspire to what Peter presented as the higher qualities.

Today, a woman might read these words and find them a threat because the strong prevailing fashions available for women appear to be castigated by Peter. It may be wise for some to consider this passage a challenge to their assumptions, but what Peter says is that these things are not the way to win a husband's affections so as to win him to Christ! It is far better to think of this passage as advocating the attractiveness of a pure and gentle spirit rather than offering a blanket condemnation of fashion or beautification. Overreaction to scripture can be as damaging as misinterpretation!

For Christians, the most important feature of the text is the small remark at the end, which indicates that God regards the 'imperishable' qualities of women as 'very precious'. The two words used by Peter are firstly 'gentle', a word which can equally mean 'humble', and secondly 'peaceful', also meaning 'quiet'. The reason why Peter mentioned these qualities may not be because he wanted to keep women quiet and demure. This is a rather coarse assumption which does not take account of the circumstances from which this advice arose. Just as today, women who became Christians were deeply concerned if not deeply worried about the state of their husbands before God. Peter's advice to be humble and peaceful suggests that he felt the matter was best left in God's hands and that agitation of spirit and its consequences would not help win anyone close (such as a husband) to Christ.

Application

I am well aware that many people in the church feel very strongly about the subordination of women, and people with strong views will always find a way of attempting to read scripture to fit their opinions. It is too easy to read verse 1 of 1 Peter 3 and conclude something about women and men which is not true of the text, or of what Peter was

attempting to say in his sermon (as reported in his letter). Peter undoubtedly accepted that male domination was part of the social fabric of his own day, and so his comments can easily appear to support this, but the heart of his message was about the concerns of new women converts about their husbands, not a message about male-female relationships whether in Christian or non-Christian marriages. However, I hope I have explained that it is unwise to take what Peter said as if it was some kind of doctrinal principle.

There is some general comment within the study today which relates to application, so I will not repeat this. However I do believe it is worth commenting that the whole issue of fashion, jewellery, make up and presentation of women is indeed important, as it is for men. Although the Bible does not suggest guidelines, it does indicate that modesty is a good guide. This passage does not say this directly, but it is strongly implied. The extraordinary explosion of interest today not just in fashion but in cosmetic surgery for reasons of fashion along with body piercing, make-up and presentation, for men as well as women, is something God's people should treat with caution. The Gospel is about celebrating who we are under God, not about what we make of ourselves, or make ourselves out to be.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage tell you about God's purposes for relationships between men and women?
2. How should we assess what level of adornment (jewellery etc.) is appropriate for both women and men today?
3. Do you think this scripture implies anything about the issue of body piercing? Should Christians take a stand against this, or not?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I feel cautious about some of this, as a man writing about things which pertain to women. I also hope that if the letter really did command that women be subordinate to men, then I would expound scripture faithfully. However, it does not, and after looking at other scriptures, I am not inclined to follow that path. There are mysteries within the relationship of men and women, but they are not reflected in a doctrine of the subordination of women.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Do you know people who are married and are concerned about their non-Christian spouse? If so, see if you can find ways of encouraging them both in their walk with the Lord, and in committing their husband or wife to the Lord's hands.*
- *Talk to a friend about the level of make-up, fashion and other personal adornment you may use. Make sure you are content before the Lord with what you use.*

Final Prayer

O Lord, may we find peace through our love of You and the love of our families. Remove from our lives the spirits of tension and division which create trouble and distress, and open our eyes to the precious nature of the relationships we enjoy. May they remain secure in You; AMEN