**Week 6**

***Submission – Part 2***

***1 Peter 3:1-12***

**16-17 May 2022**

**“No Fear” –** This chapter of scripture is probably the one that has been most narrowly applied to women in the church, and it may cause some anxiety as we anticipate discussing the concept of a wife submitting to her husband and of a husband living in an understanding way with his wife. If we have found ourselves feeling very tense as we did the homework, it is probably because we have heard some teaching on this concept that simply wasn’t right. Yet we know that we have nothing to fear from the pages of scripture because there is nothing in it that will harm us. It is crucial that we understand what is actually being said here because it can only be for our good.

**Review –** Last week we saw that we can willingly submit to employers and other authorities over us (as long as they are doing nothing that violates God’s law) because God has placed them there, and so we are ultimately submitting to God Himself, who is our just Judge. We were also pointed to the example of Christ. Peter has said again and again, “Let your actions shout the gospel.”

**Remember the Context –** Remember that Peter is addressing new converts who are living as exiles in a hostile environment, so we need to read this instruction to husbands and wives in that light. He is saying, “Hey wives, if you are a new convert married to an unbelieving husband, how should you live?” And he is asking husbands who are new converts living with unbelieving wives, “How should *you* live?” And then he asks all the believers, “Hey, family of God, how can we submit one to another within the body of Christ?”

**“Perfect” Marriages –** Too often in our Christian sub-culture, we have viewed the perfect home and marriage as that of Ward and June Cleaver in *Leave It to Beaver,* and we try to be them. But we need to recognize that marriage is a covenant between one person who is made up of many different factors and another person who is made up of many different factors. When those two things come together, they can look very different from household to household. So we need to give permission for marriage to look not just one way, but many ways. That means that we can’t look at other marriages and say, “They are doing it wrong. *This* is what ‘biblical marriage’ looks like.” We need to stop over-defining biblical marriage. And we need to **keep in mind that what Peter is addressing in this passage is *marriage between a believer and an unbeliever.***

**Cultural Implications for Women –** What was it like to be a wife in first century Rome? Wives of this era had *some* rights. There were laws that protected them from domestic violence or gave them some property rights if they went through a divorce or perhaps rights to children. But these rights were brand new. Any change in cultural norms takes time to implement, i.e. to move from being “laws on the books” to being “new rules truly enforced”, and this was no exception. For hundreds of years in Roman culture, people acted on the principle of *pater familias*, i.e. that the oldest living male member of the family was the absolute head of the family who controlled all the family’s resources. This went to the extreme that even if you were a grown man in your 60’s and your father was still living, you could not own property until he died! Not only that, but the head of the family had the power of life and death over his children. There are recorded instances of adult children being put to death because their fathers thought they were being disrespectful or deceitful. When a woman gave birth to a child, the father had the power to determine if they should keep it. If he felt that they couldn’t afford this child, it was left on the steps of a temple to either perish in the elements or to be taken into some household as a slave. Not only that, but a good Roman wife was expected, in some business settings, to be a sexual partner of other men with whom her husband had business dealings. So imagine being the believing wife of an unbelieving husband in this culture. Greek and Roman philosophers regarded women as subhuman—slightly above a slave, but not the equal of men. Yet this is the environment that Peter speaks into.

**“Likewise” –** Peter is not saying “in *exactly* the same way” but rather “follow my train of thought a little further as I work my way up the social ladder from slaves to wives to husbands in applying principles of submission.” It is the *actions* of the wife, not her words, that is most likely to influence her husband as he observes her respectful and pure conduct—not just toward him, but toward the Lord. So once again Peter is advising his hearers to “let your actions shout the gospel”.

**Inward Versus Outward Beauty –** Women tend to be more verbal than men and so naturally default to words to try to persuade their husbands to their point of view. Another “default reaction” is to try to use their outward beauty to manipulate their husbands. So just as Peter urges wives to let their conduct speak for them, he now tells them not to use outward adornment as a manipulative tool. Instead they are to cultivate a winsome quiet spirit, the beauty of which will *never* fade, unlike their physical beauty. We need to spend time building our character and developing a more beautiful soul, because that is eternal.

**A Gentle and Quiet Spirit –** Peter is telling the believing wives who are married to unbelievers that they aren’t going to be able to hold onto their husbands or keep their husbands from harming them by the way they look. It takes more than that. He wants them to develop a gentle and quiet spirit. But what precisely is that? It does not necessarily mean that you have a gentle and quiet *outward* personality. Rather, it means that you are not quarrelsome. You are not looking for a fight. It means that you choose your words carefully when you have an opposing view—and that when you do so, you show respect as you speak. You trust in the just Judge and do not use strident words to carry the day.

**Sarah, an Unexpected Example –** Sarah seems at first glance to be a very unlikely candidate. We don’t find a specific example of her calling Abraham “lord” in the Old Testament; instead she tended to boss Abraham around to get her way. She also agreed on two occasions to be the concubine of another man, which would have put the line of the Messiah in jeopardy if she had conceived. So what was Peter thinking about when he chose Sarah to illustrate the concept of a gentle, quiet spirit? When precisely or on what occasion did she do this?

**Abuse of Submission –** We have to consider this question: was Sarah obligated *to agree* with her husband when he asked her to pretend to be his sister to the point of becoming the concubine of a foreign ruler? And the answer is no, she was not. What Abraham asked her to do was against God’s law, and she would have been fully within her rights to refuse to do it. But 1 Peter 3:5,6 has been used all too often in the church today to tell women who are asked by their husbands to break God’s law or who have been subjected to a behavior that breaks God’s law, “You need to just submit.” That is **not right**. It creates an environment of unhealth in which women are harmed. If your husband asks for what God forbids…if he asks for what the laws of your country forbid…if he asks for anything or does anything that places you or your children in harm’s way, you are under a spiritual and moral obligation to remove yourself from that situation *immediately* and find help. Find someone to intercede on your behalf. That is an invalid exercise of authority, and it should not be found among the people of God. Remember Psalm 11:5, *“The Lord tests the righteous, but His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.”*

**Sarah’s Amazing Example –** So if we can’t look at Sarah’s agreement to become the concubine of another man as an example of being submissive in a godly way, what is it that we look to in her life? The key is to examine the last part of 1 Peter 3:6, *“…if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.”* What did Sarah fear more than anything else? What was her greatest desire? Can we even begin to imagine how she felt when she held baby Isaac in her arms at long last? Yet later, when Abraham comes to take Isaac and sacrifice him at God’s command, we hear no protests from Sarah. No protests at all from a woman who has been so vocal in the past about her wants. She remained silent, trusting the One who had brought life from a dead womb, and she allowed Abraham to take her beloved son. She, like Abraham, knew that God could raise her son from the dead, if need be.

**A Question of Trust –** Sarah submitted to Abraham because she submitted to God. Her act of faith is worth paying attention to. As we consider how to apply her example in our own lives, the root question is, “Who do you trust?” Do we trust the just Judge enough to allow our actions to shout the gospel even to someone who has the power of life and death over us?

**The Husband’s Responsibility –** Peter moves on to address husbands next. If we observe the number of verses devoted to the groups addressed, we notice that thirteen verses were devoted to slaves, six to wives, and only one to husbands! Why is that? Partly it is because that husbands were the least vulnerable in Roman society. The life of a believing husband married to an unbelieving woman was not at risk. [Edie’s note: I think another reason is that Peter has already laid the groundwork for how we should submit to those around us, and he can summarize most of that by saying “Likewise…” He doesn’t have to reiterate it for each group but just devote himself to what is specifically relevant for a given group.] What Peter told the husbands, however, would have been shocking to them because it went completely against the social code of *pater familias* (“the husband rules!”) These men would have expected Peter to say, “Make your wife obey.” In fact, *nowhere* in scripture are husbands told to bring their wives into submission.

**Heirs Together –** Genesis 1-3 shows us that men and women were created to be co-rulers over creation. Humankind was not pronounced “good” until the woman was created, and both men and women were image-bearers of God, holding equal value in His sight and being equal recipients of His grace. Because of this, we cannot say that men have more *value* than women just because they were given authority in the home. Authority has novalue attached to it; it is simply a means of maintaining order in society. When authority is used well, it is not even necessarily associated with greater *power*. But there is one aspect of power that Peter does address when he says, “…showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel”. Many times this has been applied as meaning that men should treat their wives like “fine china” or “a delicate tea cup”. But this doesn’t line up with how the word “vessel” is used elsewhere in scripture. It is most commonly used to refer to our *physical bodies*, as in “…we hold this treasure in earthen vessels”. Generally speaking, women’s bodies are weaker than men’s. And when a woman is pregnant, her body takes on weakness for a period of time. Notice that in the two other parallel passages that deal with the roles of husbands and wives (Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3), husbands are given similar advice. They are instructed not to be harsh and to love their wives and care for them as they would for their own *flesh*. So a man who has physical dominance over his wife is not to exercise his physical strength in a way that would harm her. So women are not to run to *words* to win an argument and men are not to run to *force*.

**Expressions of Mutual Submission –** From there Peter moves on to address how we all should live as a body of believers. He wants us to know how to express mutual submission—not authority-based submission, just mutual submission to one another. He mentions five areas, the first of which is *unity of mind*. What does this mean? It does *not* mean that we will agree 100% with each other on every issue, but that we *do* agree on the essentials of the faith, such as the Trinity, the nature of the atonement, and why resurrection matters. Hence the old adage, “In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; and in all things charity.” Peter ends his list of five positive expressions of submission with *a humble mind*. All too often we experience disunity because of our lack of humility; we are proudly determined to prove that we are right. As he calls on his readers to bless others instead of repaying evil for evil, he is saying that our least risky relationships should be those with other believers.

**Summary –** When Peter quotes Psalm 34:15 to say that the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and His ears are open to their prayer, he is reminding us once again of the just Judge who sees all that happens to us and acts on our behalf. So let there be *like-mindedness* among the body of believers. Let there be *sober-mindedness* among those who are in relationships where they must deal daily with an unbeliever who either is closely associated with them or holds some sort of authority over them. Walk carefully. Choose your words with care and use them sparingly and only when you know that they will be heard; other than that, let your actions shout the gospel. Peter, who ran away at the first sign of opposition, is telling his readers to *stay* and to *entrust themselves* to the just Judge who is fully trustworthy.