

1 Peter 3:7

Introduction

Over the last several weeks, we've seen that Peter's emphasis has been on submission – submitting to governing authorities (even Nero's and Pontius Pilate's), submitting to masters (even crooked and unjust masters), and submitting to husbands (even those who are actively disobedient to the word). Peter wants us to see that submission is how we fearlessly live out our freedom in the Gospel as a testimony to a world that oppresses God's people. In other words, it's in the very context of obeying God rather than man that submission becomes such a powerful testimony to the Gospel and to our true freedom in Christ. So it's in this sense that Peter wants us to see Christian wives and Christian slaves as examples and models for us all.

But now, after all these exhortations to submission, Peter now turns briefly to address one of these three groups of people who are in a position of authority – and that would be the husbands.

I. 1 Peter 3:7a — Likewise husbands, live [in the marriage relationship] according to knowledge...

The word for “live” or “live together” (*synoikeo*) is not the usual word for “live.” (*zao*) It's actually a word that appears only once in the entire New Testament, and that's here. But wherever you find this word in the Greek Old Testament (14x's), it always refers very specifically to living together in marriage as husband and wife. This is a word that refers to the whole marriage relationship in all of its aspects – including the social relations between the man and the woman as well as the physical and sexual relations.¹ In other words, the relationship

¹ Genesis 20:3 (LXX) — And God came to Abimelech by night in sleep, and said, Behold, thou diest for the woman, whom thou hast taken, whereas she has **lived with** a husband.

Genesis 20:3 (ESV) — But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is **a man's wife.**”

Deuteronomy 22:13–14 (LXX) — And if any one should take a wife, and **dwelt with her**, and hate her, and attach to her reproachful words, and bring against her an evil name, and say, I took this woman, and when I came to her I found not her tokens of virginity...

Deuteronomy 22:13–14 (ESV) — If any man takes a wife and **goes in to her** and then hates her and accuses her of misconduct and brings a bad name upon her, saying, “I took this woman, and when I came near her, I did not find in her evidence of virginity”...

Deuteronomy 24:1 (ESV) — When a man takes a wife and **marries** her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her...

Deuteronomy 25:5 (LXX) — If brethren should live together, and one of them should die, and should not have seed, the wife of the deceased shall not marry out of the family to a man not related: her husband's brother shall go in to her, and shall take her to himself for a wife, and shall **dwelt with her.**

Deuteronomy 25:5 (ESV) — If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and **perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.**

Judges 14:20 (ESV) — And Samson's wife **was given** to his companion, who had been his best man.

Isaiah 62:5 (ESV) — For as a young man **marries** a young woman, so shall your sons marry you.

1 Esdras 8:70 [NRSV] — For they and their descendants have **married** the daughters of these people, and the holy race has been mixed with the alien peoples of the land.

2 Maccabees 1:14 [NRSV] — On the pretext of **intending to marry her**, Antiochus came to the place together with his Friends, to secure most of its treasures as a dowry.

Sirach 25:8 [NRSV] — Happy the man who **lives with** a sensible wife.

between a husband and wife is unique and special in every way, and so we see this reflected in having a unique and special word that describes the husband and wife “living together.” So here, Peter takes this special word, and he addresses it not to the wives, but specifically to the husbands: “Husbands, live together [with your wives],” or we could say “**Live** [in the marriage relationship]” according to knowledge.” What we see Peter calling for, here, is a very purposeful and active and diligent approach to the marriage relationship on the part of the husband. Living with a wife in the marriage relationship is to be a full time calling for the husband.

Husbands, in every part of your relationship—in every aspect of your “living together” with your wives—you are to be always characterized by “knowledge.” All of your social relations with your wife and all of your physical relations with your wife—in short, all of the ways that you interact with and relate to your wife—are to grow out of and be rooted in “knowledge.” Are you seeing once again the purposeful, active, conscientious, and careful approach that a husband is to take towards his marriage?

So what does it mean to live with my wife “according to knowledge”? The modern English translations all interpret these words to mean “live with your wives in an **understanding** way,” (ESV) or “be **considerate** as you live with your wives” (NIV). Now, by all means husbands should do this, and Peter will make this very point later on in the verse, but I very strongly disagree with this interpretation here. In the first place, I don’t see this word used in this way anywhere else in the New Testament. In other words, nowhere else is the word “knowledge” used to refer to being considerate or understanding. Instead, “knowledge” in the New Testament always refer to our knowledge of God or our knowledge of His truth, and even more specifically to our saving knowledge of God through the Gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ. (cf. Luke 1:77; Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 8:1; 13:2, 8; Phil. 3:8; Col. 3:10; 2 Pet. 3:18)

- Colossians 1:9–10 — And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.
- 2 Corinthians 4:6 — For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

It’s this kind of “knowledge” that best fits the context here in 1 Peter. Back in chapter one verse 14, Peter compared who we are now as obedient children to who we used to be in the passions of our “ignorance.”

- 1 Peter 1:14 — As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former **ignorance** [*agnoia*].

Sirach 42:9–10 [NRSV] — A daughter is a secret anxiety to her father, and worry over her robs him of sleep; when she is young, for fear she may not marry, or if **married**, for fear she may be disliked; while a virgin, for fear she may be seduced and become pregnant in her father’s house; or having a husband, for fear she may go astray, or, though **married**, for fear she may be barren.

Wisdom of Solomon 7:28 [NRSV] — God loves nothing so much as the person who **lives with** wisdom. [In this verse, the author seems to be thinking of a man clinging to knowledge like a man clings to his wife in the context of a covenant relationship.]

In chapter two, Peter speaks of the “ignorance” of the foolish and unbelieving world.

- 1 Peter 2:15 — For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the **ignorance** [*agnosia*] of foolish people.

And now Peter says that husbands are to live with their wives not according to their former ignorance [*agnoia*] or the ignorance [*agnosia*] of the world around them, but rather according to the knowledge [*gnosis*], or the “enlightenment,” that they have received now through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You can see very clearly that this is not about mere “head knowledge.” What Peter is saying is that it’s our saving knowledge of God through the Gospel of His Son Jesus Christ that is to shape and determine every part and every aspect of our living together with our wives.² If that sounds lofty, and big, and grand, and completely overwhelming, then I guess that’s **good** – that’s the point. Husbands, do we really understand this? Are we really taking this seriously?

But couldn’t Peter say the exact same thing to the wives? Yes, he definitely could, and he really already has.

- 1 Peter 3:1–2 — Likewise, wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, so that even if some are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your pure conduct **in fear [your pure conduct rooted in the fear of the Lord]**.

Wives, too, are to live together with their husbands according to the Gospel light that they have received – according to their fear of the Lord (which is the beginning of knowledge; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Isa. 11:2; 33:6). The difference here is not our Gospel calling as husbands and wives, but the context in which our calling is to be lived out. In the last three sections Peter has addressed those under authority and called on them to submit to those in authority over them. But now Peter addresses those **in** authority and he reminds them that the **same** Gospel truths that determine the conduct of the Christian wife (in her position under authority) are now also the Gospel truths that must shape and determine our own conduct as Christian husbands (in a position of authority).

Both in the Scriptures and in the culture of Peter’s day, to be a husband was to be in a place of authority, so the authority here is automatically assumed in the word “husband.” But whereas in the secular writings of Peter’s day, husbands were exhorted to exercise this authority and to rule over their wives (even if it was gently and kindly), the Bible nowhere exhorts a husband to

² This interpretation (cf. Watson; Schreiner; Achtemeier; Michaels) also fits the pattern of the previous three sections in Peter:

1 Peter 2:13, 15–17 — Submit yourselves to every human creature [in any position of authority over you] **on account of the Lord... For this is the will of God**, so that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. [Submit yourselves] as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but [submitting] **as bondslaves of God**. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. **Fear God**. Honor the emperor.

1 Peter 2:19 — For this is grace, when, **because of conscience toward God**, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

1 Peter 3:1–2 (See above)

exercise his authority – **at least not in so many words**. If the real and God-given authority of the husband is only assumed in all the biblical exhortations to husbands, then what these exhortations are really concerned with is **how** this **authority** is to be **used** and **to what end** this **authority** is to be **directed**. Husbands, as the one in the place of authority, you are to live with your wife not according to your former ignorance or the ignorance of the world around you, but rather according to the knowledge and the full “enlightenment” that you’ve received through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Husbands, it’s your saving knowledge of God through the Gospel of His Son Jesus Christ that is to shape and determine every part and every aspect of your living together with your wife. So what will this mean? What will this look like in real life?

II. 1 Peter 3:7b — Likewise husbands, live [in the marriage relationship] according to knowledge, **bestowing³ honor on the female as the weaker vessel...**

Before we look at what’s so amazing and wonderful about these words, we have to explain a little bit. We hear the word “weaker” and in our culture obsessed with power and strength we automatically think of something that’s deficient – we think of something negative and bad. But that’s certainly not at all what Peter intended.

In the first place, we know that Peter is not saying that the woman is morally or spiritually weaker than the man. (cf. Prov. 31:10-31) Just last week, we saw how Christian wives are called to submit themselves to their husbands, so that even if some are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives. That’s a calling that can be fulfilled only by those who are morally courageous and spiritually strong. A woman who submits even to a disobedient husband is certainly as spiritually fearless and bold as any man will ever be. I like how one commentator describes a submissive and holy wife as performing “feats of moral and spiritual strength.” (Davids)

It seems that the obvious place to begin is with biology – with the simple fact that men are physically stronger than women. Now I suppose God could have done anything He wanted. He could have created women to be just as “manly” as men, but then that would ruin the whole point, wouldn’t it? The weaker sex is also the fairer sex, as I think we all admit, and in some sense, these two realities seem to go hand in hand (being weaker and being fairer; cf. reproduction). So the point here is to see that being physically “weaker” is for the female ultimately a good thing and related to the fact that she is God’s good creation. It’s only in that light that I would dare to take this one step further.

I also believe that Peter is describing the female as emotionally/relationally “weaker” – not as though this were a bad thing (not like being emotionally unstable), but rather once again as

³ This word (*aponemo*) is used only here in the New Testament and only three times in the Old Testament where it always has the sense of distributing, allotting, or portioning out.

Deuteronomy 4:19 — ...and lest having looked up to the sky, and having seen the sun and the moon and the stars, and all the heavenly bodies, thou shouldst go astray and worship them, and serve them, which the Lord thy God has **distributed** to all the nations under heaven.

3 Maccabees 1:7 — By doing this, and by making donations to their temples, he **inspired** his subjects with confidence.

3 Maccabees 3:16 — So, having **bestowed** considerable sums of money upon the temples of the several cities, we proceeded even as far as Jerusalem.

something that's ultimately very good. We know that God has created the woman different from the man not just in her physical makeup, but also in her emotional/relational makeup.⁴ And so we also know that if God had created women with the same emotional/relational makeup as men, the world would be a far less good, and a far less beautiful place. It's at least in part the emotional/relational constitution of a woman that enables her to reflect *uniquely* the very image and likeness of God. (cf. Isa. 49:15; 1 Thess. 2:7-8; compare with 1 Thess. 2:11-12)

I think this is why Peter uses the word "vessel." If he had had in mind only the physical, then he could easily have said that the woman is weaker "**in body**." But he uses the word "vessel," I think, to refer to *everything* that sets her apart as a woman.⁵ This would also explain one other unusual thing that Peter does here. Most translations say, "bestowing honor on the woman." But Peter doesn't use a noun here. He uses an adjective that appears only one time in the entire New Testament and that's right here.⁶ I've translated, "bestowing honor on the female" (emphasizing the contrast with "male") but we could translate more literally: "bestowing honor on the womanly one," or, "on the feminine one" as the weaker vessel. So here again, I think we see that what Peter has in mind is all that makes a woman uniquely a woman and not a man – physically as well as emotionally and relationally. And this must all be very good because both "vessels"—both the feminine one and the masculine one—are equally a part of God's good creation and equally made in the image and likeness of God!

So now I think we only have one problem left. If this emotional/relational side of being a woman is really such a good thing (if we could even describe it as one of the woman's "strengths"), then why would Peter describe it here as being "weaker" than the emotional makeup of a man? I think the answer is simple and straightforward. Peter uses the word "weaker" to emphasize the idea of being more vulnerable.⁷ The physical and emotional/relational makeup of a woman (we could say what makes a woman a woman and not a man) are together both good and beautiful. But in a sinful and fallen world, it's precisely these good and beautiful attributes that result in her being more vulnerable to oppression and injustice, and more vulnerable to abuse of both the physical and emotional kind. (cf. Col. 3:19) Can a woman stand up *under* these things with spiritual and moral courage equal to that of any man? Yes, she can! But the point remains that she's still weaker in the sense of being more vulnerable to suffering in these ways than is the man, whom God created as the "stronger" vessel.

And so now, perhaps, we're ready to see what's really so amazing and wonderful about Peter's words here in verse seven. In the eyes of the world, what might be most surprising is that Peter doesn't say, "bestowing honor on the female *in spite of* the fact that she is the weaker vessel," but rather, "bestowing honor on the female *as* the weaker vessel" or "precisely **BECAUSE** she is the weaker vessel." When God created "man," He created him male and female – the stronger vessel and the weaker vessel. Part of the goodness of the stronger vessel was related to its

⁴ My point here is not that a woman is "emotional" and a man is not. Both are "emotional" beings.

⁵ Cf. The use of the word vessel in Rom. 9:21-23 and 2 Tim. 2:20-21

⁶ The Greek *gynaikēios* appears six times in the Septuagint with the following contexts/meanings: Menstrual period (Genesis 18:11); feminine clothes (Deut. 22:5; Judith 12:15); women's courtyard (Esther 2:11); woman's diadem (Esther 2:17); womanly work (Tobit 2:11)

⁷ Perhaps the language of the weaker and stronger brother in 1 Corinthians 8:7-10 could be paraphrased as the more vulnerable and the less vulnerable brother? I am not aware of any other Greek word that would serve to communicate this primary idea of vulnerability as simply and effectively as *asthenes*.

strength, whereas part of the goodness of the weaker vessel was actually related to its “weakness.” And then, in the goodness and wisdom of God’s creation, God brought the “stronger” and the “weaker” vessels together in the covenant bond of marriage. Look what God is doing! Isn’t it beautiful? On the one hand, it’s precisely the wife’s nature as the weaker or more vulnerable vessel that will in part fit her and equip her to be her husband’s helper. On the other hand, it’s precisely the husband’s nature as the stronger vessel that fits and equips him to promote and, in this fallen world, to safeguard his wife’s honor, and in every way to affirm and communicate to her—and to all—her worth and value as God’s creation, reflecting uniquely His own image and likeness. We might see a parallel to this situation in Paul’s example of the church as a body with different members.

- 1 Corinthians 12:21–25 — The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

In this sinful world, strength has been perverted into a means for controlling, and using, and even abusing those who are more vulnerable. But in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we see firsthand the true beauty of strength as it was originally intended.

- Isaiah 42:1–4 — Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.
- Mark 10:13–16 — They were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

Husbands, as the stronger vessel and the one in the place of authority, you are to live with your wife not according to your former ignorance or the ignorance of the world around you, but rather according to the knowledge and the full “enlightenment” that you’ve received through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What will this mean? It will mean using your “strength” and authority to promote and safeguard your wife’s honor and well-being, and in every way to communicate to her—and to all—the very highest esteem in which you hold her. It’s true that being married to a holy and godly wife will make this far easier and more joyful than if one is married to a disobedient and unsubmitive wife. And yet there is an honor that every husband is to bestow on his wife, **even if** she’s disobedient to the word, simply because she’s the weaker vessel in God’s good creation. But now Peter gives a different and an even more wonderful reason for the honor that husbands are to bestow on their **BELIEVING** wives.

III. 1 Peter 3:7c — Likewise husbands, live [in the marriage relationship] according to knowledge, bestowing honor on the female as the weaker vessel, **as also⁸ heirs together with you of the grace of life.**

And so we come back, now, to the beauty of what we saw last week – that in this relationship between the stronger and the weaker vessels, characterized as it is by submission and authority, there is in the Gospel an absolute and total and unqualified and glorious equality. Could Peter possibly have said this any more forcefully or more wonderfully than he does here? Our wives are **heirs together with us** of that promised salvation that Peter has said will be brought to us all at the revelation of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 1:13; cf. 1:10-11)

The point here isn't that this is a surprise or that we didn't know this already. The point is that as husbands we're to diligently embrace this Gospel reality always more and more and therefore be motivated to bestow all the more honor upon our wives. By God's grace, we can share a oneness and equality with our wives in the Gospel that couldn't be possible in any other way. And how is it that we really celebrate this joy and privilege as husbands? By always bestowing honor upon our wives.

On the one hand, this is our joy and privilege; on the other hand, this is our solemn obligation and responsibility before God.

IV. 1 Peter 3:7d — Likewise husbands, live [in the marriage relationship] according to knowledge, bestowing honor on the female as the weaker vessel, as also heirs together with you of the grace of life **in order that your prayers may not be hindered.**

As I reflected on these words, I realized that I'd never really felt their full weight and gravity until now. What Peter's saying is that if I fail to bestow honor on the woman in my life as the weaker vessel and a co-heir with me of the gift of eternal life, then God Himself will turn a deaf ear to me when I call out to Him. What a terrible thing it is to pray to God and know that He doesn't hear me – to cry out to Him and know that He's not listening. Husbands, are we really feeling the full weight and gravity of these words? Because if we are, they should cause us to tremble. One commentator writes:

“So concerned is God that Christian husbands [bestow honor upon their wives] that he ‘interrupts’ his relationship with them when they are not doing so. No Christian husband should presume to think that any spiritual good will be accomplished by his life without an effective ministry of prayer. And no husband may expect an effective prayer life unless he lives with his wife ‘[according to knowledge], bestowing honor’ on her. To take the time to develop and maintain a good marriage is God's will; it is serving God; it is a spiritual activity pleasing in his sight.” (Grudem)

⁸ Greek: *hos kai*

Conclusion

So, husbands, what are the ways that we are bestowing honor on our wives? What are the ways that we are communicating to her the very highest esteem in which we hold her—in our use of our time, in our use of our words, in the priorities we set and the choices we make? For those of us who still have children in the home, what are the things we say to our wives in front of our children and about our wives to our children? Not just, what are the things we don't say, but what are the things we *do* say and purpose to say? I think of how the husband of the excellent wife praises her in Proverbs 31:

- Proverbs 31:28 — “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all” ... A woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

Husbands, we are to live with our wives not according to our former ignorance or the ignorance of the world around us, but always and in every way **according to** the knowledge and the full “enlightenment” that we’ve received through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And when we truly understand the Gospel, we’ll understand that this means actively and diligently bestowing honor upon our wives as those who are the weaker vessels and co-heirs with us of eternal life. May we all be husbands whose prayers God listens to, and who faithfully live out in our marriages the true knowledge of God in Christ.