



ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER
WON WITHOUT A WORD

1 Peter 3:1-6

April 11, 2010

Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, ²when they see your respectful and pure conduct. ³Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— ⁴but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. ⁵For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, ⁶as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

Introduction

For a Christian, it is often hard to live with a non-Christian. It is not usually difficult to live on the same street, or go to the same school, or work in the same office. But it can be very challenging for a Christian to share life together at an intimate level with a non-Christian.

This is especially true in marriage. Marriage is the most intimate of relationships. As a result, if you are a Christian, yet your spouse is not, you know you find yourself in a very delicate and often painful situation. You realize that even though you sleep in the same bed, you’re nevertheless living—mentally, emotionally, spiritually speaking—miles apart.

Today’s passage addresses this precise situation. It speaks directly to wives. However, not just to wives in general, but wives in this particularly challenging situation: *Christian wives who are married to non-Christian husbands.*

Some of you find yourselves in this situation right now. You are a Christian, but your spouse is not. And it’s hard. You need to know that this passage holds out encouragement and hope to you. You also need to know that I resonate with your experience. My own mother became a Christian in her fifties, shortly after I came to Christ. But my father is not a professing Christian, and so she has for the last sixteen years lived the reality of this passage. And I have watched her live it.

For those who are not in that particular situation, this passage still has much to say to us. This passage helps sensitize us to the challenges some of our sisters in Christ go through on a daily basis. This passage also has much to say about how our own lives can influence others for

Christ; it has much to say about the nature of modesty and true beauty; and it has much to teach us about God's priorities and what he values.

The thrust of this passage is this: *Christian wives are to live in a way that is itself compelling to their non-Christian husbands.* And this passage explains how a wife is to do that, and why a wife should do that.

Christians have often turned to this passage as a blueprint for domestic relations between husbands and wives. While that is not necessarily wrong, it tends to miss the main point of the passage. These verses are part of a larger section of scripture that begins back in 2:11 and runs through the end of chapter 3. The theme of this entire section of Scripture is *to call marginalized believers to missional living in the midst of a hostile world.* We find the theme for this whole section in 2:12: "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."

Peter goes on, then, to explain how believers live honorable lives before Gentiles in the different areas of life: in society (2:13-17), in the marketplace (2:18-20), and, then, in the passage before us, in the home (3:1-7). We must keep this in mind as we look at these verses; they are not primarily intended to provide a handbook on the relationship between a husband and wife; they are primarily intended to provide wives with *an evangelistic strategy for the home.*

Submission For the Sake of Mission

Our passage begins in verse 1 by addressing wives with a call to submission. However, this is not just submission for submission's sake, but *submission for the sake of mission.* "Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives" (v. 1). Wives are to honor and respect their husbands, even if their husbands happen to be non-Christians, so that they might win their husbands to Christ.

Now, you need to appreciate how awkward and tricky it would have been in the pagan culture of the first-century for a Christian convert to be married to a non-Christian or pagan husband. Not only would the wife's Christian commitments have introduced a major rift into the family, but her faith would have also meant that she would have neglected one of her chief duties as a wife: tending to the household gods! Her neglect in this area would have been taken very seriously because, from a pagan outlook, it would have been viewed as jeopardizing the welfare of the entire family. In addition, her lack of support for her husband's own religious commitments would have been extremely embarrassing to her husband and brought him into disrepute as both a man and a husband.

So, it is not hard to imagine how unbelieving husbands might be tempted to look upon their believing wives with a bit of suspicion, if not downright scorn; perhaps even tempted to slander them among their friends or verbally abuse them to their faces. And it is in the midst of this crucible that Peter calls wives to be subject to their own husbands, so that they may be won without a word. Ironically, while their unbelieving husbands are reviling them with words, believing wives are to try to woo their unbelieving husbands without a word.

Conduct That Speaks

But how is the believing wife to win her husband without a word? If she is not to complicate things by talking about the gospel, how can she communicate the gospel? Peter's answer is this: *let your conduct speak*. An unbelieving husband can be "won without a word by the conduct of their wives—when they see your respectful and pure conduct" (v. 2). In other words, wives, let your life speak about Christ; let your actions tell the story of the gospel; let your whole demeanor be a parable in which Christ can be seen and even encountered.

Peter goes on to explain how this can and ought to happen: "Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, or the putting on of clothing—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" (vv. 3-4). Here, the point is this: Wives, do not let how you look be the primary way in which you influence your husband. Do not let what you wear speak louder than who you are. Instead, cultivate the beauty that truly speaks—what this passage calls "imperishable beauty." This is the beauty of the "hidden person of the heart," this is the beauty not of the body, but of character. This is the beauty that comes from the Holy Spirit and produces gentleness in your life. So, let Christ-like character do the talking. Let virtue have its voice.

Two Encouragements

So, submission for the sake of mission, that is the call of this passage. And letting conduct and character, rather than outward appearance, speak, that is the way in which wives are to pursue the call of this passage.

This passage obviously confronts wives with a challenging task; it also confronts wives with an extremely countercultural approach to making it happen. For we live in a post-feminist world, where the very idea of the submission of women to men—husbands or not—is looked upon with suspicion. We also live in a fashion-conscious, cosmetic-saturated, Botox-injecting world, where physical beauty is everything.

So, let me not condescend to the wives and women in the room nor mince words, but simply say: *this is tough stuff Peter's talking about here!* At the same time, let me encourage you with the encouragement this passage itself provides. Why should you pursue the call of this passage and not put a lot of stock in physical beauty or your outward appearance?

First, because you will be prioritizing what God finds precious. This passage reminds us that what is prized in the eyes of the world, is not necessarily precious in the sight of God. What God values is not ultimately our physical appearance; that which comes through "the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, or the putting on of clothing" (v. 3). Instead, what God finds precious is this: "the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" (v. 4). This is what is precious in God's sight. "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7).

Peter's second encouragement to wives to be submissive to their non-Christian husband is this. By doing so you, *you will be joining the great company of the godly women of the past.* Wives, while you may find yourselves out of sync with the world, you will be right in step with history's most distinguished and influential women. "For," as Peter explains in verse 5, "this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their husbands." Who were these holy women who hoped in God? They were probably the great matriarchs of the Jewish tradition, the wives of the patriarchs of Israel: Sarah, the wife of

Abraham, Rebecca, the wife of Isaac, and Rachel, the wife of Jacob; each of them lynchpins in God's redemptive purposes.

If you want to see what one of these women looked like in action, find a few minutes to read Genesis 12-26. There you will be able to take a close look at the life of Sarah, Abraham's wife. We often think of Abraham in *exclusively* glowing terms, as a great model of faith, which he was; but a close reading of Genesis reminds us that Sarah also had her hands full with this guy! There is Sarah, dwelling as a sojourner and alien in a foreign land, being pawned off by her husband to the local bigwig in Egypt as a cover up. No wonder Peter mentions Sarah in particular as an example of hope and holiness in verse 6. No wonder Peter also adds the closing comment of verse 6: "And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening."

Holy women who hope in God, like Sarah, are undaunted in the face of unbelief, whether in the world or on the part of their own husbands. They do not condone it; but they are not intimidated by it either. As a result, they can submit themselves to their husbands yet at the same time clothe themselves with strength and dignity, with holiness and humility, because they speak to themselves the words of Heb 13:6: "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" Here is a profile for Calvary women: holy women who hope in God, do good, and fear nothing.

Significance

As I said at the outset, even though this passage is directed to a very specific situation, addressing Christians wives who are married to non-Christian husbands, it nevertheless has significance for all of us.

First of all, this passage ought to increase our confidence in the missional power of Christian character. In other words, this passage reminds us of the power of conduct and character in the work of evangelism and mission to the world. Conduct speaks. Character talks. More than that, as this passage says, people can be won without a word by the conduct of Christians. Thus, this passage serves as a strong support for prioritizing word *and* deed in our efforts to reach the world. It also serves as an encouragement to us all about the importance of the little things in our lives that speak louder than we probably realize.

Furthermore, this passage clarifies what missional living really looks like, how it is done, what is important. Often one gets the impression that being missional means being cool, or at least really conversant with culture. But this passage serves to remind us that missional living—the kind that actually wins non-Christians without a word—is not about looking a lot like the world, but about living a life of hope and holiness in the world. Not cool hair or fashionable clothes, but radical character and confidence in God—that's what is ultimately compelling to non-Christians about Christians.

The second significant implication of this passage is that it ought to inform our understanding of what God really values and the nature of true beauty. This passage gives us a great insight into the heart of God. It reminds us of what God values, what he finds precious. He values the beauty of character over the beauty of the body. We also see the source of beauty: *hope in God*. Peter refers to those beautiful women of old who were "holy women who hoped in God" (v. 5). To hope in God and rely upon him makes a person beautiful. Holiness and hope beautify. The

beauty of the Christian is the beauty of God himself communicated to the Christian through the Holy Spirit whom the Son pours out in our lives.

Application

In light of these two significant implications of this passage, let me now draw out a few specific words of application.

First, a word to wives of non-Christian husbands, and to wives of professing Christian husbands who are living like non-Christians. Do not miss the most important phrase in this passage for you: “hoped in God” (v. 5). Holy women are those who hope in God. And those who hope in God are those who adorn themselves with humility and reverence and purity and submission. This is so critical to understand. If I may speak directly to you: *in order to submit to your husband, especially if he is an unbeliever or a wayward but professing believer, you must bank your hope fully upon God.* You must rely completely upon God to meet all of your needs, not ultimately your husband. And if you fail to hope fully in God, you will not be able to submit to your spouse. For you will be driven to protect and provide for yourself. And this will inevitably force you into conflict with your spouse. At the end of the day, then, your submission to your husband depends not ultimately upon his worthiness or reliability, but upon the worthiness and reliability of God himself. So, hope in God!

Second, a few words to moms and dads: Moms and dads, what are we teaching our little girls about what compelling beauty really is? *Barbie* is okay; but do not let your daughter think that *Barbie* is real beauty. So, too, moms and dads, read and discuss and pray over this passage together, when your children are young, so that when they hit the teenage years, your hearts and minds are prepared to respond with grace and wisdom to questions about whether your daughter can get her nosed pierced, or wear a bikini at the pool, or dye her hair purple, or wear a strapless dress to Homecoming. Furthermore, moms and dads, we must not leave boys out of this training; they need, as much as the girls, to understand what true female beauty is all about: not racy outfits, blonde hair, or a size two, but character and faith. Finally, they must see it modeled in you as their parents. If they see mom preoccupied with physical beauty, they will become preoccupied with physical beauty. And if they never hear dad commending mom for the beauty of her character, they will have a hard time thinking character really counts, either to their parents or to God.

Third, a word to the rest of the women: Let this passage challenge you to seek modesty in your dress; resist the temptation to exert influence over men, whether that be your husband or others, by your physical appearance. Instead, concentrate on letting the content of your character be your compelling beauty. This may require doing simple things like cancelling your subscription to *Cosmopolitan* or *People* magazine, shopping at different stores or different malls, even adjusting your style preferences. Women who hope in God are women who have not been conformed to the pattern of this world in the way they approach physical beauty; they are those who have been transformed by the renewing of their minds and thus prioritize what God really values.

Fourth, a word to men: Men, let me admonish you—as I admonish myself—not to encourage our wives, or women in general, to be preoccupied with their physical appearance by being preoccupied with it ourselves. Of course, everywhere a man turns he is prompted, if not tempted, to make physical beauty his preoccupation. But we need to resist this with all our might! We must be men who prize saintliness over sexiness, godliness over good looks.

Fifth, a word to singles, both men and women: If you're single and of a marrying age and looking for a spouse, be crystal clear on the nature of beauty. Ladies, spend more time cultivating Christ-like character than searching for a spouse. And, single men, be clear on what you are looking for in a potential spouse. Get your priorities straight.

Sixth, a word to seniors: In light of the teaching of this passage, may I remind you—indeed, remind us all—of the beauty that ought to come with growing old. In our culture, the physical affects of getting old are a curse, something to be avoided like the plague. It is interesting this passage encourages women to not fear anything frightening; in our culture, the impact of aging on a woman's appearance seems to be very frightening to many. Ironically, however, this passage reminds us that women who hope in God should be getting *more and more beautiful with each year that goes by*; more beautiful because their character is becoming more Christ-like, their hope more resilient, their devotion to Christ more vibrant; more and more beautiful because, as Paul says, "Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). Therefore, the older you get, it is true: the more wasted your physical appearance tends to become. Yet the older you get, as a Christian, the more your inner self is being renewed and thus true beauty cultivated.

I would like now to briefly exhort us as a church: The church of Jesus Christ, our church, needs to be a community that prioritizes beauty, yes, but the beauty that comes from Christ in and through transformed character. We need to help each other with this because it is very countercultural stuff. We must not judge each other: "Did you see what she had on the other day? She obviously is not cultivating inner beauty." Instead, we need to serve one another in love by being countercultural *together*. Our children's and student's ministries must teach this vision of beauty, so too our women's ministries. And our men must praise this kind of beauty: Proverbs 31 like beauty. And we must seek to embody it corporately by being a place that does not show deference to those who are more physically attractive than others, but instead relates to women and men regardless of their physical prowess or appearance.

Finally, may I speak to the non-Christians for a moment: You may well be here this morning because your spouse is the very person addressed by this passage. May I encourage you, first of all, to emphasize with the dilemma your wife finds herself in. She loves you, no doubt; but she also loves Jesus Christ, and because she loves both you and him, she wants you to come to know him. She wants you to come to know the one who has changed her life: Jesus Christ. He was the sinless Son of God and yet for your sake and mine, took on all our sins on the cross and died in our place, suffering the righteous wrath of God that we might trust in him and have eternal life.

This is the gospel Christians believe; this is the gospel *you* can believe and embrace; this is the good news she wants you to know and love and grab hold of by faith. In fact, helping you come to know this gospel is the most loving thing she can do for you. So, be patient with her; I am sure she does not want to be annoying to you or make you feel uncomfortable, even though that sometimes happens. May I also encourage you to take a risk and, if you do not already, talk to her about her Christian faith. And just listen, and then ask more questions, and then listen some more. Even though they may be out of your comfort zone, you only have to gain from doing that. And should you like to have a man-to-man talk about this Jesus, I myself would be most glad to do so with you.

Conclusion

The call of this passage is a challenging call; it is a countercultural call. It is a call for wives to live missional, Christ-like lives in the context of the home and before an unbelieving world.

The great theologian, Augustine, in his *Confessions*, tells the moving story of a godly wife who sought to win her non-Christian husband without a word. The wife happened to be his own mother, Monica, who was a devout believer but had a very difficult marriage to an unbeliever. Listen to what Augustine says of her; it's as though he had our passage in mind as he wrote:

She never ceased to try to gain him for you as a convert, for the virtues with which you had adorned her, and for which he respected, loved, and admired her, were like so many voices constantly speaking to him of you.

Augustine continues:

He was unfaithful to her, but her patience was so great that his infidelity never became a cause of quarreling between them. For she looked to you to show him mercy, hoping that chastity would come with faith.

What was the outcome of her submission to her husband for the sake of mission? Augustine tells us, when he concludes this story by saying:

This was my mother's way, learned in the school of her heart, where you were her secret teacher. In the end she won her husband for you as a convert in the very last days of his life on earth.¹

Wives, do you believe you can win your unbelieving husbands without a word by letting the voice of virtue constantly speak to him of Christ? And, brothers and sisters in Christ, do we believe we can win an unbelieving world without a word by letting our lives—our conduct and character—speak gospel truths? This passage not only calls us to this task; it holds out this hope as well.

As we close this service, we will sing a favorite hymn of mine that is really a prayer. It is the perfect prayer for us to pray as our response to today's message. It is entitled, "May the Mind of Christ." The closing stanza in particular dovetails wonderfully with the thrust of today's text:

May His beauty rest upon me,²
As I seek the lost to win,²
And may they forget the channel,²
Seeing only Him.

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.9.

May this be the prayer of every woman, of every one of us, in this congregation. May those with whom we live and do life, see not us, but the living Christ living in and through us by his Holy Spirit; his beauty resting upon us.

Amen.

© April 11, 2010 by Dr. Todd A. Wilson