

# 1 Peter 3:1-7

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## *Wives and Husbands*

*Peter describes what harmonious marriages look like, with husbands and wives equally serving one another to mutual benefit. Wives most effectively help their husbands by having good character, a beautiful spiritual life, and speaking respectfully—all of which positively influence their husbands.*

*Husbands most effectively love their wives when they seek to understand them and when they treat them with honor as an equal partner in life. Peter warns husbands if they don't honor their wives, God will dismiss their prayers.*

It is worth remembering that the audience of the Apostle Peter's letter are Jews who are exiles from Israel, living in the Roman diaspora (a dispersion or scattering). These Jews are away from home, living for a God who is not accepted by the Roman government, or Roman culture. These believers are cultural misfits:

“To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen.”  
(1 Peter 1:1)

Peter is telling them how to live in this difficult circumstance. His solution is to embrace the identity of being an exile. Not just as exiles from Israel, but also as exiles from the World System. The word translated “aliens” in 1 Peter 1:1 is also translated “pilgrims”—someone on a journey.

Our true citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:8), but our existence is here on this earth. We are all on a journey. Our job is to bless the earth while here. But our ultimate destination is elsewhere. The idea of exile and return is a theme throughout the Bible. Humanity is exiled from Eden (Genesis 3:24). The faithful will return to reign in a new earth where righteousness dwells (Revelation 21:1-4)

When the Jews were exiled from Judah to Babylon (586 BC), God declared that they would return after only 70 years. But rather than telling them to just bide their time, God instructed them to bless that land, build houses, raise families, to pray for that land, and seek peace (“Shalom”) for the cities in which they dwelt (Jeremiah 29:4-7). “Shalom” is the idea of harmony in righteousness. Things working in perfect step with one another as God designed. Believers in Christ are to do the same. They are to bring “shalom” to their surroundings, through their example. This is true in general, but specifically in marriage.

In this passage, Peter shows exactly how husbands and wives can have harmony. He explains,

- How women can understand men, and minister to them, AND
- How men can understand women, and minister to them.
- In other words, “How we can serve one another.”

In the preceding context to Chapter 3, Peter is summarizing how to live out the will of God in a foreign land:

“For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.”  
(1 Peter 2:15-17)

Chapter 3 begins with *In the same way* which connects it to the prior passage dealing with difficulties in life. This means we should expect marriage to be a challenge. Peter writes:

*In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior* (vs. 1-2).

*In the same way*, just as with the king, employers, etc, Jesus is still our example of how to live. *In the same way*, “Wives, do good when your husbands are making life difficult and seek their own best interest, as unto the Lord. Make your husbands a priority over other possibilities.”

Believers are to act as free people, free from sin, free to choose living as God designed. In doing good, we will shut up evil-doers. We are fully accepted by God’s favor. If we fear God, meaning we desire His approval, we use our freedom in service to God and to our fellow men, to do unto others as we would have them do. Our true master is God, and any human authority over us is a mere person.

But our master (God) asks us to treat even the foolish and ignorant as valuable humans. God also asks us to honor the king. In the case of Peter’s audience, this is Caesar Nero, who was no friend to Christians. In fact, ultimately Nero would put both Peter and the Apostle Paul to death. But God calls us to love our enemies. Especially, however, we are called to go out of our way to love believers (John 13:34). That means to give particular, deliberate help and affection to other brothers and sisters in Christ. As exiles, we should not care for the honor of the world. Instead, we are to care for honor from God.

Jesus was our best example of this servant-leader life God has called us to. Peter pointed to Jesus earlier in his letter:

“and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”  
(1 Peter 2:23)

Jesus did what He did for the approval of His Father. He upset the entire status quo in His surroundings. He brought down two governments (Israel/Rome) through speaking the truth in

love, and living a life dedicated to serving others, pleasing God. Hebrews 12:1-2 tells us that Jesus “despised the shame” of dying on the cross. He did not allow the shame to control Him. He did not act out of fear of pain and loss. Rather He rejected the shame as a motivation. He gave no value to being humiliated, as compared to the incredible honor He would be given by obeying the Father. The dishonor and ridicule that the world tries to use to get us to conform to it—Jesus gave so little value that it was despised in His eyes.

In this passage about marital relationships, Peter entreats his audience to take this exact same attitude into marriage which we ought to have in all other circumstances: Do good. Be a servant. Please God. Even if it means suffering loss and rejection.

It is far more natural for people to want to know how to make others serve us. Jesus’s example shows us the opposite.

The verses immediately following this passage (1 Peter 3:1-7) makes it inescapable that the point here is how to serve one another:

“To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.”  
(1 Peter 3:8-9)

If we want to “inherit a blessing,” married couples ought to serve their spouse. Everyone benefits, the person being served, and the servant, who inherits a blessing by being a blessing. This is stated overtly in another passage on husbands and wives, Ephesians 5:28:

“So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself.”  
(Ephesians 5:28)

We see here that it is in our self-interest to love and serve our spouse.

These principles can only be lived out by choice. We are free, “Husbands ought to love” which means we choose. There is nothing anywhere in 1 Peter that says “God will make you” or “You should make your spouse do this.” It is the individual’s responsibility to choose. This passage is not to be used as an opportunity for elbowing or making demands of one’s spouse.

It is noteworthy that the instructions are first given to women. This is possibly because women have the highest leverage in relationships. This is because men greatly fear, and avoid female rejection. That means women have a powerful influence on men, a power they can use for great good. Peter instructs the wives how to exercise this great power. Peter begins with a circumstance where the husband is *disobedient to the word* of God. Since men tend to be hard-headed, this is probably a typical situation.

For the *wives*, Peter exhorts: *be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior* (vv 1-2).

Generally, men are terrified of female rejection, and they prioritize avoiding it.

We see this with the very first marital relationship: Adam and Eve. Adam was apparently standing right there with Eve, watching the entire dialogue with the serpent play out. He did not step in to protect Eve, and he knowingly disobeyed God because she asked him to:

“and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.”  
(Genesis 3:6)

The Apostle Paul states that only Eve was actually taken in by the serpent’s lies, and Adam was not. His motivation was not to be like God, but to find approval from his wife by taking the fruit she offered him:

“And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.”  
(1 Timothy 2:14)

The serpent did not tempt Adam. He went through Eve, who gave the fruit to Adam. Adam never said, “Don’t do it,” perhaps because he did not want to risk rejection. This indicates that God made women to have immense relational leverage with men.

This means that wives have an immense influence to do good for their husbands. Peter gives wives specific instructions on how to use their leverage for good—to be amazing servant leaders, like Jesus, that make an enormous impact on their husbands.

It is again important to note that Peter does not say “Men, make your wives submissive and respectful.” Rather, Peter is addressing the wives, “Women, God wants you to make a better choice.” You have a choice. You can do it or not. It is up to you. But this is how you can do great good.

Why should wives make this choice? It will make their life better because they are doing good. They will be blessed. And it will likely (not always) make your husband (who is *disobedient to the word*) behave better (*be won*). The good example of the wife who is imitating the good example of Christ will be a strong influence on their rebelling husband, *as they observe the chaste and respectful behavior* of their wives.

We all decide to whom we subject ourselves—who we obey and to whom do we submit. For example, we all choose whether to be subject to God or money (Matthew 6:24-26). We were told in the prior verses to be subject to the ruling authorities because they are appointed by God—it is our choice, we don’t have to (1 Peter 2:13-14). We were told to be subject to our employers (which could include customers or investors) and serve them as though we are serving the Lord—it is our choice, we don’t have to (1 Peter 2:18).

Jesus Himself is subject to an Authority:

“When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.”  
(1 Corinthians 15:28)

Jesus is subject to the Father. As Ephesians 5 says, when a husband loves his wife sacrificially, he loves himself (Ephesians 5:28-30). We can see the great result and benefit of Christ’s sacrificial love: the Father made all things subject to His Son as a reward.

So it is with women and men—in putting our spouse’s interest above our own natural desires for them to serve us, we gain the greatest benefit.

We don’t have to. No one will make us. It is what is best for us, but we choose. As with all scripture, this is a renewed way to think, that serving others is the path to our own best self-interest (Romans 12:2).

How do wives practically put their husbands’ needs above their own natural desires?

God made men and women. He created male and female, in His image (Genesis 1:27). We are physiologically different. Men have different hormones from women. And, importantly, men have severed brains. When male infants are in the womb, at a certain point their brains get a testosterone bath that severs the connection between the two brain lobes. This means the passageways between the left and right lobes of the brain are small for men. That is why little girls typically talk when they play and little boys make little boy noises (“crash, boom, pow”).

That means men miss a lot of data. They are excellent at focusing, but not at multi-processing. When women talk they can also watch their children and listen to the three other ongoing conversations, and also remember their next appointment, while also texting someone. But men focus on one thing at a time. That is because male passageways between their brain lobes are limited. Focus is a strength, and a weakness.

Every weakness is also a strength. Men miss a lot, but with whatever they happen to be concentrating on, they can understand deeply. Men are gifted at problem-solving—making sense out of things. Which easily becomes another weakness: men are gifted at self-rationalizing. Men naturally focus on themselves, rationalizing their behavior, and are quite adept at doing so.

Which leads to men needing their wives’ help to follow the *word* of God:

*In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives.*

We see Peter pointing to men who are living sinfully: *if any of them* [husbands] *are disobedient to the word*. This disobedience is inevitable in all believers, as we still battle our sinful nature, and men especially, who prefer to obey themselves rather than God’s *word*.

Men are not only gifted at self-rationalization, they are also prone to seeking power. Which means men are stubborn. Stubborn self-rationalizers don't tend to "obey the word." They think they know better. Men might be oblivious, but more likely are just self-absorbed.

And so, for wives, God's advice of what to do in order to seek their own best interest is to seek their husbands' best interest:

Do not use corrective words (a *disobedient* husband *may be won without a word by the behavior of his wife*). Corrective words to a male feel like rejection—they will run from these words.

- Do use contrast—example (*behavior*, or in other translations, "conduct"). When wives live as a godly, Christ-like example, it is generally (not always) irresistible to men, and they will follow your example.
- Make your primary example your awesome character
- Do use words of respect, words of honor. This is like honey for a bee to a male.
- Do be courageous. It takes faith (that God will see) and courage to do this. You have to believe that doing something that won't feel natural is actually for your best.

For the wives, Peter gives an analogy between outward appearance and inward:

*Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God (vv 3-4).*

Peter describes the way in which women dress themselves, accentuating their natural beauty by *braiding* their hair, or *wearing gold jewelry*, or *putting on dresses*. This is a description of a woman who is put together, fashionable, wearing shiny *jewelry* to highlight her beauty, or perhaps to attract attention—*adornment* that is *merely external*.

Peter is encouraging wives to dress up their internal person as well as their *external*. The inner, spiritual *adornment* is in *the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God*. God primarily looks at inner beauty, the beauty of great character.

A *gentle and quiet spirit* has an *imperishable quality*; it never deteriorates, rusts, or loses value, it is always *precious in the sight of God*.

For wives, a good appearance gives them even greater relational leverage, but that is not what their husbands need most. The thing men need most is a good example from someone who respects them. Men generally find honoring, high character, respectful women irresistible.

Peter gives an example of this type of woman from the Old Testament:

*For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him*

*lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear* (vv 5-6).

The *holy women* of the past *who hoped in God* and followed this approach sought the best for their husbands and therefore sought their own best, by speaking honoring words of respect. It was *in this way*—in what Peter just described, the spiritual *adornment*, the spiritual dressing up—that these women are an example.

The *holy women* are a great illustration of *the hidden person of the heart*, the inner spiritual life of a wife who has *a gentle and quiet spirit, which God values as precious and imperishable*. In *this way in former times*, all the way back to *Sarah*, it is how she who put her faith in God (*who hoped in God*) adorned herself. She was *submissive* to and *obeyed* her husband *Abraham*.

Sarah chose to submit to Abraham; it was her choice, just as all people must submit to employers and civic authorities (1 Peter 2:13-20). It takes great courage to seek the best for another—especially a stubborn male. Sarah did this because she feared God, she *hoped in God*, which means she put God's approval above any rejection in the world.

Sarah is the given example of using honoring words, she *obeyed Abraham, calling him lord*. It is worth noting how this turned out wonderfully for her. It does not guarantee this result; we are called to obey God, and accept whatever results come. But this passage says the tendency will be that this will occur.

Sarah's husband Abraham was very rich. He was powerful. The rich and powerful men of the ancient east typically had many wives and concubines. But not Abraham. He just had one—Sarah. Even when Sarah was barren, Abraham stuck with her only.

It was Sarah who had the idea to have a child by a concubine (Genesis 16:2). And Abraham really, really liked the resulting offspring: Ishmael. He thought Ishmael was to be his promised heir (Genesis 17:18, Genesis 21:10-11). God promised the heir would come from his body. He didn't promise it would come via Sarah until after Ishmael was born (Genesis 17:19).

But when Sarah asked to put away Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham complied. He honored Sarah's wish, even though it meant his son departing (Genesis 21:10-14). That is some kind of influence she had with Abraham.

How did this happen? In part because Sarah *called Abraham lord*, meaning she used words of honor and respect for him. Sarah was a beautiful woman (Genesis 12:11). But it appears the emphasis in this passage is Sarah's respect for Abraham.

This shows that men will fall all over themselves to get praise and responsiveness from women. Sometimes unwisely, to their own ruin (such as with Samson and Delilah). Men hate rejection. Critical words hurt like fire. Men run from fire. Men run to honey. This passage indicates that respectful words from women of godly character can reshape and tame men, so they walk in obedience to God's ways.

None of this is to say that wives are responsible for their husbands' choices. Wives are only responsible for their own choices. The point is that when wives affirm respect, they send "no rejection" signals to their husband. They are using their relational power for good.

There is an episode in Sarah and Abraham's life showing Sarah's courage, and how she honored Abraham. They were going to Egypt. Abraham asked Sarah to tell the people there she was his sister, which was true (she was a half-sister, the Lord had not yet forbidden close marriage—Leviticus 18:9). Abraham's reasoning was "You are beautiful, and the practice in Egypt is to murder the husband first and ask questions later." She did as he asked. She honored Abraham in this way, she trusted him.

It was likely reasonable for her to trust her husband, that he would provide for her, and that he would come get her. We can see a few chapters later what Abraham accomplished in rescuing Lot. Abraham's nephew Lot was taken hostage, so Abraham gathered 318 men that he had trained, marched all night, caught up with 4 kings who had just defeated 5 kings local to Abraham, defeated them in a night raid, and recovered all the loot and his nephew. Abraham and his army returned home and gave everything back, other than the 10% he gave to Melchizedek, the high king and priest of Salem. It is likely that Sarah had observed this determination and capacity in Abraham.

Abraham was not someone to be messed around with. So it seems here that Abraham is telling Sarah, "I can't rescue you if I am ambushed and murdered, so please buy me time to come get you." She had to trust he would come get her, like he later did with his nephew Lot.

The custom was to negotiate a dowry with the brother, so as Sarah's brother, Abraham would have the ability to gain intelligence and find a way to extract Sarah prior to her being added to Pharaoh's harem.

It worked out just as Abraham thought; Pharaoh took Sarah, but in this case, God intervened. Later, Abraham did the work to rescue Lot. In this case, God did the work.

Sarah had probably already seen Abraham's bravery. But while in Egypt it was her turn to have courage and honor Abraham, trusting in his plan. It took a lot of courage. And she had this courage; she trusted and honored her husband.

Peter ascribes this courage to modern wives if they *adorn* their *spirit* with a *quiet and gentle nature*, and treat their husbands with honor. He explains that wives *have become* Sarah's *children* if they *do what is right without being frightened by any fear*. They will bear Sarah's likeness, they will be like her, like her daughters, carrying her legacy, if they have the courage to *do what is right (without being frightened by any fear, they honor their husbands)*.

Now Peter addresses husbands, how they ought to love and serve their wives:

*You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered. (v. 7)*



Just like wives should seek the best for their husbands, the husbands should serve their wives.

This is a call for men to have courage. From the standpoint of a man, it takes courage to try to understand a woman. But it is his job as a husband to *live* with his wife *in an understanding way*, to understand her. That means men need to engage. This is frightening for most men. They are soul-shy, and prefer to engage relationally as little as possible.

In Ephesians 5, Paul tells men that the way to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself is to use words to elevate our wives to be their best. For their best interest. Jesus will sanctify His church, His bride “having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Ephesians 5:26). The application of husbands loving their wives as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25) includes using words to help their wives grow in sanctification with Christ.

This takes courage for men. They do not want rejection, and using words to “sanctify” risks rejection. Certainly, Jesus does not always tell us what we want to hear. Conversely, Jesus chastises those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:3; Revelation 3:12). Husbands are far from having the knowledge or authority of Jesus. But they are to engage with their wives in love, seeking to help them grow.

Women are prone to use words, and are exhorted instead to use example. Men are reluctant to use words, but are exhorted to have the courage to love by using words. In each case, the objective is to serve the other in love. In each instance, by serving in love we are seeking our own best interest.

Men are supposed to be willing to be an “Adam” who, instead of standing and watching, intervenes, and tells their “Eve”: “I don’t think you should eat the fruit.”

By application, it would seem that men should:

- Engage with relational, soul-level words in order to understand their wives
- Risk rejection (which Adam wasn’t willing to risk), and use words in order to help wives be their best possible self. We are to seek their best, speaking the truth in love.

Men generally would rather appease than engage. But in order for a man to really love his wife, a man needs the courage to rise above concern about rejection and seek her best.

Women, show honor to husbands using words of respect.

Men, show honor to wives using words of *understanding*.

The Greek word translated *weaker* from the phrase *as with someone weaker, since she is a woman* (v. 7) is used in other passages of situations where someone needs help or aid. What aid does a *woman* need? Women endure pain better than men. They endure being alone better—So what do they need?

Wives need the husband's invitation to share life with him in order to fulfill her design. To be treated as *a fellow heir of the grace of life* (v. 7). *A fellow heir* is a partner. God made Eve to be a helper to Adam. A partner. To have a partnership, you need a partner. It takes two to dance. Wives need someone to dance with. In order to dance, they need an invitation.

The word translated "helper" in Genesis 2:18 is used twenty-one times in the Old Testament ("ēzer"); all but a few instances describe God. God is our helper. To be a helper is to act in the image of God. Women have a high and holy, made-in-the-image-of-God-like calling:

"Our soul waits for the Lord;  
He is our help and our shield."  
(Psalm 33:20)

But to be helped requires an invitation to dance from the partner, the husband.

When husbands don't invite wives into their lives, to fully share as a partner in all they do, they are preventing their wife from fulfilling her calling as a *fellow heir of the grace of life*.

It is a challenge for men to do this. This is not something men do naturally. Men are focused. Men don't like vulnerability. They don't like exposing themselves to potential rejection by telling their wives something they think will help but they might not like ("Eve, I recommend you don't eat that fruit"). But men need to embrace all these things and honor their wives. To do so is to serve their own best interest (Ephesians 5:28).

This passage ends with a sobering reality—if husbands don't treat their wives with *honor* and *understanding*, their *prayers* will be *hindered*. If men won't invite their wives to partner with them in life, God won't invite men of the church (His bride) to partner with Him.

The biblical pattern is that God does for us what we do to others. This is often His judgement. It is also His forgiveness, as we see in the Lord's prayer, which asks God to forgive us just as we forgive others. Afterwards Jesus explains,

"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."  
(Matthew 6:14-15)

For men, if they love their wives, they will seek to understand their wives. They will seek to invite their wives to fully partner, so that their *prayers* won't be *hindered* (so that God's partnership with you won't be inhibited by your failure to *honor* your wife).

This all boils down to discovering ways to love one another like Jesus loves us. Sometimes Jesus says things we don't want to hear—like telling us to focus on the needs of our spouse over our own needs. That can be hard. Sometimes truth is difficult. Sometimes patience is difficult. Each situation requires wisdom to know what is best.

But God is our partner. We can love our spouse as service to God. The church is the bride of Christ, and He is our example how to love as a husband (Ephesians 5:32). Wives have the high and holy opportunity to provide an example to their husbands how to engage constructively as a helper to Jesus.

To love one another means to love our spouses. That means putting their needs over our own, and loving them by helping them find God's calling, to fulfill their design. For men, this means risking vulnerability to help their wives be their best, to open up to them and invite them to partner in all they do. For women, it means avoiding words of criticism, and instead using words that honor. It means focusing not only on outer appearance, but inner beauty, with an example of godly character, as unto the Lord.

When we love our spouse, we are loving God, and we are the greatest beneficiary.

### **Biblical Text**

**In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives,<sup>2</sup> as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.<sup>3</sup> Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses;<sup>4</sup> but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.<sup>5</sup> For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands;<sup>6</sup> just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.<sup>7</sup> You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.**