



MINIMIZING MARITAL HASSLES

Part 1

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Sometimes my secretaries give me material for my sermons. Kathy knew I was speaking on submission by the wife to her husband this week. So here's what she gave me.

The husband had just finished reading a new book, *"You Can Be the Man of Your House"*. He stormed into the kitchen and walked directly up to his wife. Pointing a finger in her face, he said sternly, "From now on, you need to know that I'm the man of this house, and my word is law! You will prepare me a gourmet dinner tonight, and when I'm finished eating, you will serve me a sumptuous dessert. Then, you are to draw me my bath so I can relax. You will wash my back and towel me dry and bring me my robe. Then you will massage my feet and hands. Then after that's done, guess who's going to dress me and comb my hair?" His wife replied, "The funeral director would be my guess."

I'm dealing with a highly sensitive and possibly volatile subject today—submission of the wife to her husband. I'm hoping to get through this sermon alive. You see, submission by the wife is not a popular subject in our culture. It's not even a popular subject in our churches. I thought to myself, "Hey, we're a Baptist church. Why not call a special business meeting and vote these verses out of the Bible?" Sorry. It doesn't work that way. But actually in practice, that's what a lot of Christians have done.

These verses are part of the Word of God. They're to be taught and obeyed. They're actually powerfully liberating truth for marriages. But they'll test our fallen nature and our cultural indoctrination to the limit. We must trust God that He isn't going to sell us down the river or sit up in Heaven thinking up ways to make our lives miserable. We're in a section of I Peter that deals with three realms of submission to authority. The first area is submission to mandatory institutions like the government in chapter 2:13-17. The second area deals with submitting to those in authority over us in the workplace in chapter 2:18-25. Each sphere of submitting to authority seems to get closer to home—now it's the realm of marriage—the wife submitting to her husband in chapter 3:1-6. Please follow along as I read this passage. READ. After reading a passage like this, you probably wonder why I didn't entitle this sermon, "Desperate Housewives".

Before I get into these verses, you need to know that Peter's teaching here is not culturally dismissible. What do I mean? In those days, women were in a similar class to servants. In fact, women were a suppressed lot. Under Roman law, a husband had absolute authority over all members of the household including his wife. A woman was in a disadvantaged position.

We might be tempted to say that these verses don't apply to women today because the social structure has changed. Yes, things have changed, but these verses still apply. They rise above any culture to the order of authority that God has ordained for marriage. God designed roles for the husband and for the wife and they are taught consistently throughout the Bible for any culture. The husband is to lead the home and the wife is to submit to that leadership (Eph. 5:22; Titus 2:5). Marriage is not an egalitarian arrangement. When the roles that God designed are properly applied, a marriage will thrive.

The problem isn't the model. It's what people do in their roles. Some husbands have either abdicated or abused their roles and have wounded their wives. And some wives have become liberated and have either ignored or resisted their husbands' leadership. What we have in these verses is remedial teaching—how wives and husbands are to treat each other when things aren't going well in the marriage.

This is hard teaching with difficult questions. I'm not going to gloss over it. I'm going to tackle it head-on. My goal is to do honest justice to the Word of God. So let's look at Peter's instruction to wives who are in a difficult marriage. Here's the overarching teaching:

Wives, submit to your own husbands even if they are disobedient to the Word (vss. 1-6).

The first two areas of submission in I Peter were instruction to Christians who were living in difficult circumstances. The government was oppressing Christians. Masters were being unreasonable. Now we have husbands who were making life hard for their wives because they weren't following God's Word. This section is about how a wife should relate to a difficult husband. Here's what Peter says and I want to break his instruction into three parts.

1. Obey Peter's command to submit (vs. 1a).

Peter ties the submission of the wives to their husbands to the preceding verses. He says literally, "in a similar way, wives be submissive." Similarity to what? As servants were under the authority of their masters, so wives are to recognize that they are under the authority of their husbands. The word "submit" means yielding to an authority over you. A Christian wife must recognize that she's under the authority of her husband by the will of God. She's to follow his lead. There's nothing here that says a woman can't dialogue with her husband. She should. But in the end, a wife must be willing to yield to her husband's final say-so.

The matter of submission carries no thought here, implied or otherwise, that a wife is inferior to her husband as a person in any way. In fact verse 7 asserts that a woman is a fellow-heir of the grace of life. It's a matter of who is to take the lead role.

Now it's a blessing to be under a good husband. He'll understand that he's to use his authority for his wife's benefit. That's the purpose God had in mind. The one in authority is so placed by God in order that he might direct his operations for the well-being of those under his charge. But what if the husband doesn't get it? What if he's using his authority in ways that benefit himself and actually make life hard for his wife? Should she leave a difficult husband? Peter says "No". He says the wife is to submit.

We need to notice that women are not to submit to men in general. Verse 1 says that the wife is to submit to her own husband. A wife has no responsibility to submit to other married men, just to her own husband.

Now single ladies, I want to tell you the number one thing you should be looking for when you date a man—a Christian guy who shows you good leadership. That will be the number one clue whether you'll have a good or a difficult marriage. It's not about looks and romance, although that's great if it comes along with good leadership. If a guy is selfish or shows a temper or pushes to take you to bed before you're married, he's shown you that he'll be disobedient to the Word after you're married and that you're going to have some tough sledding.

Look for a godly man that leads you in godly ways. You'll be happy to submit to a man like that. And if submission is something you're not into, then don't get married. You're not obligated to get married. But once you do, you're obligated to submit.

Now to the married ladies. Peter's instructions in verses 1-6 are to those who are married to a difficult husband, one who Peter says is "disobedient to the word", verse 1. By that he means a husband who is disobedient to the standards of Scripture. He ignores or disobeys what God says he should be and do. It could be that a wife is married to an unbeliever and he doesn't agree with how his wife lives her life as a Christian. It can go as far as the unbelieving husband making life difficult for his wife. It can also mean a Christian husband who's not living according to the commands of the Bible and his wife is suffering for it.

What Peter says here is the wisdom of God that appears as foolishness to us. It seems ludicrous for a wife to submit to a husband who ignores God's Word and hurts her. But Peter is saying that it's through the submission of the wife that the husband has his greatest opportunity to become a fully committed follower of Christ. A wife's submission to her husband becomes her primary ministry. She's trying to win her husband to full commitment to Christ.

At this point, I want to stress something. Peter is talking about winning a disobedient husband, not a disobedient boyfriend. If a wife is married to an unbeliever, her biggest ministry is evangelism. She's trying to win her husband to Christ. But that's not a woman's job before marriage. God doesn't call on women to fall in love with unbelievers so they can win them to Christ. He asks single Christian women to marry godly men. Romance evangelism rarely works. That's what gets many women into trouble in the first place.

Well, Peter's first words of instruction to married women are to submit to their husbands whether they be nice or difficult.

Let's move to the second part of Peter's teaching about relating to a difficult husband—the strategy. If a husband is going to be won to full commitment to Christ, how's a wife supposed to accomplish that? Here's what Peter says:

2. Be quiet, behave well, and be beautiful (vss. 1b-4).

That's a mouthful. Please stay with me. That's Peter's three-part strategy for impacting disobedient husbands. So let's look at this strategy one part at a time.

The first part is verbal restraint—no nagging and no preaching (vs. 1b). If a wife's husband isn't living according to the Bible, all her words are in vain. They'll accomplish nothing. Don't keep reminding him of his shortcomings. Don't keep telling him what he ought to be doing. Don't put Bible verses on his beer cans. Don't get in his face with the Bible about his behavior. Become silent. Silence becomes the platform for the second part of the strategy.

The second part is excellent behavior—concentrating on chaste and respectful behavior (vss. 1b-2). A wife's walk is going to be far more impacting than her talk. In fact, Peter says that there's a certain kind of behavior that's effective with disobedient husbands. It's chaste and respectful behavior, verse 2. The word "chaste" has the idea of being "free from moral defilement". A chaste wife is committed to being a virtuous woman in all she does. She won't resort to anything shady or wrong.

And "respectful" means that she let's her husband know that she recognizes he's the leader. She doesn't undermine him. She doesn't run him down to others. By the way, the number two thing a husband needs from his wife is respect. You can guess what the first thing is. Once again, this respect factor shows up, just like Peter said we must give to our bosses. If we can't respect a person's character, we can at least respect a person's position. Respect of character is earned. Respect of position is conferred.

The idea of observing a wife's behavior in verse 2 means extended observation. The behavior that can win a dis-obedient husband is a time exposure, not a snapshot. It's a lifestyle over time that becomes effective to the husband. I'm sorry, but this will probably not be an overnight thing. It's going to take consistency over time.

The third aspect of the strategy to win a disobedient husband is beauty on display—showcasing inner beauty (vss. 3-4). In verses 3 and 4, Peter tells wives to put more emphasis on adorning their inner beauty than their outer beauty. We all know where the emphasis is on catching men's attention in our culture—it's a woman's outward appearance. TV, movies, and magazines all put the sexy, glamorous look before us. But if you want proof that getting a man's attention by external adornment doesn't have much staying power, just read the newspapers and tabloids about Hollywood's romantic breakups. Exterior beauty is sufficient to attract but not sufficient to retain.

Please understand that this isn't a text on wives looking frumpy and unattractive. I grew up in a very conservative religious environment. They used this passage to support the total lack of jewelry, even wedding rings, makeup, and hairstyles. But look at the text. If you were to interpret it consistently, the wives would be immodest. If you couldn't style your hair or wear jewelry, you couldn't put on dresses either. This text isn't prohibiting a good look. I think a wife should look great for her husband. But Peter is trying to direct a wife's focus to a more important beauty.

The primary beauty of a woman is her inner beauty. She can be beautiful on the outside and be lacking great qualities on the inside. When that happens, it can be a bummer. But if a woman is beautiful on the inside, it

bleeds through to her external look as well.

In verse 4, Peter tells us that a woman's inner beauty is a gentle and quiet spirit. This isn't saying a wife can't be a bubbly, outgoing, energetic person. And it's not saying that she's to be seen and not heard. It means that she displays a kindness and sweetness to her husband even when he's being a jerk. She's not harsh and attacking. She's not vengeful and retaliating. Peter says that kind of beauty doesn't fade. It's a beauty that adverse circumstances can't destroy. It's a beauty that even God is attracted to—it's precious in His sight. It's really a beauty that a wife gets from God's Holy Spirit or it wouldn't be there.

When an actress hits her 40's, she's already in the twilight of her career for external beauty. External beauty only lasts a little while. It can't keep men. But inner beauty is a lasting beauty that bears the biggest dividends with husbands and with God over the long haul.

That's the three-fold strategy that Peter tells wives to use with disobedient husbands. And that's the strategy I commend to any wife whose husband is making her life difficult.

Now here's the third part of Peter's teaching to wives relating to disobedient husbands:

3. Look to the holy women of the Bible for your role models (vss. 5-6).

There are many role models to emulate out there. But Peter tells wives not to look at what women in our society are doing who don't base their approach on the Word of God. Peter tells wives to look at the women in the Bible who have demonstrated what he has just said.

Ladies, one of the best things you can do is study the godly women of the Bible. You don't need Oprah and Cosmopolitan. Actually that stuff is so far from the Bible it's scary. Get to know the women of the Bible who, under difficult circumstances, did what was right. Peter cites three of their great qualities in verse 5. First, they hoped in God. Often their husbands led them into uncertain, unpleasant, and dangerous situations even when they followed God (Gen 12:1ff; 13:1ff; 20:2-6). But they learned to trust God.

Second, they adorned themselves, not just externally, but with inner beauty. And third, they submitted to their own husbands. In fact, Peter uses Sarah, wife of the patriarch Abraham in verse 6 to say explicitly what they did in their acts of submission. They obeyed their husbands. That statement isn't going to win a preaching popularity contest.

But Sarah told Abraham, "I understand that you're the head of our home." She did that when she called him "lord" (Gen. 18:12). Wives, that's a good thing to do—to let your husband know that you see him in the lead role of your marriage. Please don't misunderstand me—you don't have to call him "lord" like Sarah did. In those days, that was the way wives told their husbands that they knew he was the head of the home. If a husband today wants to be called "lord", I think he has a problem.

You see, I think the smart husband isn't going to be about making his wife obey him. He isn't going to issue commands. He's going to make requests. He's going to seek advice and discussion about a course of action. He's going to try to be as collaborative as possible about things. He needs to see her as his partner in their marital journey. And she needs to see him as the God-ordained leader of the home. This relationship should not be about power plays.

Well, Peter says that wives should imitate the behavior of godly Biblical women like Sarah. When a wife hopes in God in difficult times, when she concentrates on her inner beauty, and when she submits to her husband, verse 6 says she becomes, as it were, a daughter of Sarah. A daughter of Sarah is a special class of women who trust in God and submit to their husbands without fear. It's a special female spiritual lineage of married women. And Christian wives, God wants you to be in that elite group.

Peter goes on to say in verse 6 that following Sarah's example overcomes the fear a wife is likely to have when dealing with a difficult husband. A daughter of Sarah will not be terrified by the circumstances that go with

dealing with a disobedient husband. The text literally means that she will “not be put in fear by any intimidation” from her husband. God will give her amazing courage to do the right and Christ-like thing.

Church, there’s no doubt that teaching like this seems hard, if not unreasonable for 21st century wives. It may sound like this gives permission for husbands to take advantage of their wives or to abuse them, mentally and physically. It even sounds like Peter’s teaching promotes further wounding of wives and further enables the husband to continue in his dysfunction. That’s not true. If anyone ever teaches God’s Word and makes husbands think they can mistreat their wives, they’re teaching raw error.

But mistakes are made on the other side of things as well—teaching that makes women believe that a husband can treat them any way they want to without recourse. That’s not true either. There’s a Scriptural boundary for women who suffer under disobedient husbands. I don’t think you can teach this text without addressing these issues and clarifying what submission includes and excludes. So here goes.

1. Wives may experience some suffering with a disobedient husband. That’s what this teaching is about. A wife may find herself going through some pretty tough stuff. She’s to hang in there submitting to her husband. But my fear today is that some wives will either be dis-heartened by thinking they need to keep submitting without recourse to a husband who’s greatly harming them or that some wives will be empowered to walk away from their husbands because they’ve convinced themselves that he’s dangerous when he’s not.

A wife isn’t given freedom from submission because her husband may be causing her problems. Sometimes she may suffer for doing what’s right. The truth is—the wife’s Scriptural submission is the most God-effective way she can deal with her difficult husband. But I’m also convinced that certain limits apply and that’s where we’re headed next.

2. Wives should submit to their husbands except when their directives violate the commands of God. As I said earlier, the Bible teaches that even if a disobedient husband tells his wife to do something, she should oblige. But there’s a Scriptural limit. We’re not to obey any authority when they ask us to do something that conflicts with God’s commands. That limit applies here. For instance, if your husband asks you to sign a false income tax statement, don’t comply. Or if your husband asks you to do sexual things that violate what the Bible says, graciously refuse.

3. Authorities do not exist in a vacuum. The husband-wife relationship has a definite connection to the authority of the government and the church. So if a husband is breaking the laws of the land by dangerous and abusive behavior, the wife has recourse. If a husband will not listen to reason, if he will not change his destructive behavior, if he will not go for help, the wife needs to go to an agency of the government, a social agency, or church leadership for help. Often a wife is afraid to take this step because of the “family secret” and for fear of reprisals from her husband. But she must take this step. It’s the right and God-ordained thing to do. And remember what verse 6 says. A wife who does what Sarah did will be able to overcome the fear that frightens her. When a husband puts his wife in emotional and physical danger, a wife must appeal to an authority outside her home.

4. Separate from a dangerous and abusive husband if need be. God isn’t expecting wives to be objects of dangerous physical, emotional, and mental abuse. If after a wife has done all she can, if there’ve been attempts at intervention, and if she’s in actual danger or oppressive anguish, a wife should separate from her husband for protection and for a wakeup call. The Scriptures govern this action.

For Christians partners, in I Corinthians 7:11 Paul says that separation is permissible. Certainly protection from danger and harm would fall in this category. But the goal should be reconciliation. And should a Christian wife be married to a difficult unbelieving husband who does not want to stay married to his wife, in I Corinthians 7:15 the Apostle Paul says that she’s free to leave him.

But separation is a last resort. If a wife separates from her husband, it should be because she’s in immanent danger. But not only that, separation is an act of mercy towards her husband. The longer a husband mistreats

his wife, the more he'll have to give an account for on judgment day. When a wife separates from a dangerous husband, it's a way of preventing him from accounting for more sins.

Conclusion

I given my best shot at giving you what I believe to be the meaning of Peter's words for us. Some of you may agree with me. Some of you may not. Some may be feeling a lot of emotions. And some of you may have a lot of questions.

I want you to go home and honestly study these things for yourself. Be sure your pain and today's culture don't sway your interpretation and corresponding behavior. And if you have some burning questions, feel free to ask Derek or Mike or Larry this week.

Seriously, I told you a few weeks ago that covering content isn't what's important in preaching. It's getting out a message that God wants His people to hear. I had planned to deal with the whole passage this week—wives and husbands. But I felt that I needed to talk about just the wife's responsibilities in submission today. I have some important things to say to the husbands next week. And when I finish that sermon, I'm going to try to do something that I rarely do, leave time for comments and questions.