

**1 Peter 2:11-3:7**  
**Following the Footsteps of Jesus Christ**

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## **Intro**

As Christian believers, the Bible is our source of authority for ethical living. We look to God's Word to help us understand how to live faithfully. But every so often we come upon a text that seems irrelevant, outdated, and culturally offensive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Whitehorse, Canada. The text read for us this morning from 1 Peter is often regarded as that kind of text. After all, our government doesn't include emperors, slavery was abolished over 150 years ago, and the women's rights movement has changed the role of women in society and in marriage. But as I've been studying this text the past few weeks I have found it to be a message of empowerment, dignity, and hope. I want to show you the same, but to do that, I need to help you understand what Peter's readers would have heard, living in the first century. We need to first hear Peter's words through a first century lens, then make sense of it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Century households**

Stability and security in the Greco-Roman world was directly linked to the stability and security within a Roman household. A strong and prosperous household meant a strong and prosperous society. A chaotic, disorganized, and unruly household would create chaos, unruliness and tension in society. This meant that what happened inside the home was of public business and public concern. It also meant that one of the most important structures in the Greco-Roman world was the household, which consisted of a husband, wife, children, household slaves, other women and relatives. Everyone in the home had a specific role to play, based on their social status. It was expected that people would behave in ways appropriate to their particular role to maintain order and stability in the home and thus in society. The ultimate responsibility to maintain order in the home fell to the man of the house: the husband. That meant that everyone in the home fell under the authority of the man, as taught by Plato. It also meant that the husband

held sole responsibility for the behaviour of everyone in the home. If someone was not behaving as they ought, it was the man's fault.

Therefore, household codes were written to give instruction on how to fulfill one's duty within the greater society, whether as a slave, a wife, or a husband. These household codes are seen in the writing of Aristotle, Plato, and other Greek writers. But household codes were always written to the husbands because, it was believed, men alone had the authority and ability to reason and think. Greek household codes were never written to a slave or to a wife directly.

## **Slaves**

At the very bottom of society were slaves. The slave was the most vulnerable person in society: held the lowest social status, had the least amount of power or voice or control, had no rights, no privileges, no status, and were treated like human chattel. Therefore, slaves could not suffer unjustly because they had no qualification of being human. Aristotle believed that slaves were incapable of deliberate thinking and reasoning; so were not morally free persons, they couldn't make decisions and certainly were not able to take responsibility for their actions. Consequently, slaves could only receive instruction from their male master; who had the capability and authority to reason fully. It was also expected that slaves would worship their master's gods. Slaves made up about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the empire's population. So preserving the role of slaves was critical to maintain socio-economic and socio-political stability. Since the safety and wellbeing of the household (and by extension society) depended on the obedience of slaves, often slaves were treated harshly and cruelly. To live in the Roman world, slaves had to continue to subordinate themselves to masters, however unjust or unfair and cruel the social institution of slavery.

## **Wives**

Wives held more social status than slaves. This was evident because in the home, wives had some authority over slaves, children, and property. Though wives were considered to have some ability to think and reason they lacked the full and equal authority to do so, and certainly were not responsible for their behaviour. Rather, it was believed women were ruled by their emotions, and as a result women had poor judgment, were immoral, wicked, untrustworthy, and contentious. Consequently, instruction for wives came through the husband: the one with full ability and authority to think and reason. Wives did not have the full social and legal status of their husbands: women couldn't vote or hold office, couldn't take an oath or plead a case in court, couldn't be legal guardians of minor children, and were wholly and legally dependent on either their father or guardian.

Listen to these instructions of Plutarch, a first century Greek writer and biographer: "a wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals and outlandish superstitions." So, if you are a married woman this morning, the expectations of you in the first century would be:

- Your only friends are the friends of your husband. You are not permitted to have your own friends. No girls night outs, no Starbucks coffee dates, no shopping sprees, etc.
- You must worship the god or gods of your husband.

- You lack the ability and authority to reason and think properly therefore your husband tells you what to do and you can make no choices of your own and are not responsible for your actions.

## **Religions**

One of the key components of a stable household was its religion. In Greco-Roman society, the prayers of the husband to the household god(s) was important for the prosperity and well-being of the household, which directly contributed to the prosperity and well-being of the society. All slaves and women in the household were expected to worship the god of the master/husband. The impact of a new religion – with new beliefs, practices, ethics, ‘god or gods’, ways of behaving – could significantly impact the household code and, therefore also impact society. How these fundamental relationships in society: husband and wife; slave and master; are outlined in a religion either grants that religion favor in the empire or not. It was necessary, especially for a new religion, to demonstrate compliance with the important elements of social order or risk severe criticism and persecution.

## **Christianity**

Christianity was a brand new religion in the first and second centuries. It was scrutinized and its worldview was regarded with suspicion and threat among the Greco-Roman world. Like all new religions, it was held up to significant scrutiny in terms of what it taught regarding the household code. You will note that the Old Testament has no teaching on household codes. This is because in the time of the Old Testament, household codes weren’t important culturally. But in the first and second centuries, the household was the primary structure of society so any religion writing about ethics – about how to live – would need to address the household code. It is necessary in

Peter and Paul's writing for them to address the most fundamental social unit in the Greco-Roman world: the household.

So what Peter (and the apostle Paul) write in their household codes become an important defense and justification of the Christian faith. Because Christianity was such a new religion, Peter and Paul had to demonstrate that Christianity could meet the expectations of society. Peter's goal in the household code is to affirm the sociopolitical order of the first century while simultaneously reworking it on Christian principles so that Christian households would be an expression of what it means to be people of God. In a masterful way, Peter affirms the cultural perspective, so as to affirm the validity of this new religion, but also rejects the cultural perspective so as to bring in a new Christian community as taught by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter encourages Christians to conduct themselves in a way that would be both recognized and respected by Roman rulers and society as good, thereby silencing the criticism, slander, and persecution of unbelievers. How does Peter do this?

### **Differences**

There are a few key differences between Peter's household code and the Greco-Roman household code. These differences show how Peter was both affirming and rejecting the moral code taught by Greek philosophers.

1. Peter writes to slaves and wives directly. He does not write exclusively to a husband, which was the norm for Greco-Roman society. In fact, Peter's instructions to the husband is only one verse whereas Peter writes four verses to slaves and six to wives. Peter spends more time talking to slaves and wives, not because they need more instruction, but

because society doesn't deem them worthy to receive instruction from anyone other than a husband. He gives them dignity, worth, equality, and humanity or personhood.

2. Peter gives slaves and women moral responsibility for their behaviour, something that no Greek would acknowledge. Peter affords slaves and women the right to make their own decisions and the right to be responsible for their actions. Remember, in the Greco-Roman world, the husband held responsibility for the slaves and wife's behaviour.
3. Peter challenges the cultural expectation that slaves and wives had to worship the god or gods of the master or husband.

### **Spousal relationships: wives**

So let's take Peter's instruction to wives and husbands in 1 Peter 3:1-7 as an example this morning of how Peter's letter is a radical call to transformation, to empowerment, to affirmation.

Peter is talking to a wife who becomes a Christian believer but is married to a non-believer. He is not talking to wives of Christian husbands. This is a huge problem in the first century because the fact that a woman would adopt any religion other than her husband's violated the Greco-Roman ideal of an orderly home. The root of the problem is that in Greco-Roman society, wives are required to worship the gods of her husband but Christian wives cannot do that. This puts a Christian wife to a nonbelieving husband in a difficult position for several reasons: a Christian wife is regarded as rebellious, she makes her own friends in Christian community who are not her husband's friends, her husband may suffer criticism for not properly managing his household, thereby damaging his social standing. So what does Peter instruct the wife to do? First, you'll notice that Peter doesn't address the particulars of worshipping with other believers,

or of making friends with those not her husband's. Second, you'll notice that Peter's instructions are only in regard to the wife submitting to her husband, not to all men or any men, but just her unbelieving husband. Peter's instructions to wives is to maintain a demeanor acceptable in all other areas to her non-Christian husband and his values. This will reduce the tension in the household and maintain her social role in society as a wife. Thus, subordination of a Christian wife to an unbelieving husband in marriage is not a theological principle but is to avoid unnecessary conflict.

### **Submission in Marriage**

I want to spend a few moments this morning on what submission means, for it is a word that has been misused and misunderstood. You'll notice that in Peter's letter, submission throughout the entire text is guided by the phrase in 2:13 'on account of the Lord' or 'for the Lord's sake' which limits submission to be about that which the Lord wills. The Greek word for submission is better translated as 'to be subject to', or 'to be subordinate to'; rather than submit or obey. It is about knowing one's proper place or role and acting accordingly. It is not about demanding someone to give unwavering obedience to all that is commanded. Submission or, more accurately, subordination, is therefore defined differently in culture and theology. Defined culturally, if it is about finding one's proper place in society, then the definition of submission changes as culture changes. Defined theologically, the Christian view of submission is concerned about knowing our relationship to God and to others; it is about honouring theological values that transforms the believer in the context of their relationships. The foundation for Christian submission in all relationships, including marriage, is rooted in theology, not culture. This means that we need to be mindful of the specific expressions of submission related to culture. For example, in the Greco-Roman world, it was shameful and scandalous for a woman to be active outside the home,

for a married woman to appear in public without the escort of a husband or male relative, and for a woman to talk in public with the presumption that she could instruct her husband; a concern also shared by Paul in 1 Timothy. This is what was culturally defined as wrong or inappropriate for women and this is where specific cultural expectations of submission were expected.

Evidently, what counts as submission today is quite different from what counted as submission in the first century because social expectations have changed. Because submission is theological and cultural, it is very important to approach these kinds of texts thoughtfully and carefully to separate cultural expectations from theological principles.

### **Spousal relationships: Husbands**

Next, Peter addresses husbands in one verse: *Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.*” I think this verse is a good one to have in one’s home because of its rich meaning. Let me explain.

First, the Greek word translated wife actually refers to female in Greek. Peter gives instructions to Christian husbands on how to treat all females, whether a believer or unbeliever, particularly females in the household. This, of course, includes how a husband ought to treat his wife.

Second, Peter instructs husbands to treat women respectfully and considerately. A Christian husband married to an unbelieving wife in the first century may experience challenges. The wife may resent his new religion and rebel against him bringing embarrassment to the husband and diminishing the husband’s status in society’s eyes because the husband is unable to maintain order and stability in the home. Yet husbands are expected to treat their wife and all women with respect.

Third, in the context of this passage, it is clear that weaker refers to women in Greco-Roman culture lacking in social empowerment and entitlement in the way a man does. The man is stronger by virtue of his social stature in the Greco-Roman world and, I confess, the man is also stronger physically.

Fourth, Peter addresses the general Greco-Roman attitude of inferiority of women by pointing out that women are coheirs of grace, coheirs with men of the gift of life in Jesus Christ and thus not excluded from the same privileges of God's grace. This is a theological principle, not cultural expectation. The wellbeing of the household depends on the husband being able to see women as equal, as coheirs and respectfully treating them as one. This significantly increases the status of women within a Christian family and community.

Fifth, the seriousness with which God takes the necessity of men to treat women as equal heirs to God's grace is shown in the final phrase of verse 7: *so that nothing may hinder your prayers*. Lack of respect and equality towards women somehow means that men's prayers to God are hindered. Men who transfer cultural ideas about the superiority of men over women into the Christian community lose some of their ability to communicate with God. This is a warning to Christian men that the advice to wives in verses 1-6 to be subordinate to nonbelieving husbands does not carry with it the kind of superior status for Christian men found in secular society.

### **Summary**

In summary, when writing his letter, Peter had to engage the Greco-Roman worldview in which his readers lived. It is the challenge for us today to take those same principles and apply it to our cultural reality; which is a radically different worldview from the Greco-Roman world. Read in the cultural context, Peter's letter is a radical call to transformation, to empowerment, to

affirmation. It's an invitation to social transformation in Christian community. But how does this letter actually apply to us today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### **Ethics and Theology**

Well, the truly radical part about Peter's letter, more than the equal treatment of slaves and women, is the link Peter makes between ethics and theology. Ethics and theology come together in the theme of suffering. Peter links our doing – our living – to following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. A Christian's willingness to suffer unjustly out of reverence for God is because we follow the footsteps of Jesus. As Peter focuses on the sufferings of Christ, he shows us how to live. This is relevant both back then and now.

### **Suffering Messiah**

Peter points to Jesus because following the crucified Messiah is a much more effective way to change unjust political, economic, social and familial structures than specific instructions to revolutionize a society. Peter's goal wasn't about the transformation of a society, it was the transformation of a believer and thus the forming of Christian communities that called people to a new way of living.

The starting place for Peter is Jesus' suffering, then he goes back to the Old Testament to understand the meaning and significance of Jesus' suffering. Peter links Isaiah 53, the text about the suffering servant, directly to Jesus. Peter is the only writer who draws this connection for us. When we look at 1 Peter 2:22-25, we notice that Peter uses the language of Isaiah 53 but he changes the order to follow the sequence of events leading to Jesus' death.

Peter purposefully places his teaching on Christ's suffering in the section about slaves because the unjust suffering of slaves is indeed the calling of all Christians because Jesus was called to suffer unjustly. Peter begins this section in verse 21 by telling us that Jesus is our example and we are to follow in his footsteps. The Greek word for example is used to refer to the practice of how a child would learn to write. The alphabet would be written out. Children were expected to trace over the letters. This is the closest of all copies. It isn't to look at the letter then try to write it on a piece of paper. It is to trace over the letter written. It is to follow precisely in the footsteps of another. For example, since moving here 3 years ago, I've been learning how to mountain bike. I remember last summer I went with a couple of friends to Mt Sima to try downhill biking. Throughout the whole day, I always avoided a giant rock slab because, quite frankly, I was scared. On our second last ride, my friend told me it was time to try. I told her I was willing but I wanted to follow her line. So she went ahead and showed me where to go. I hopped on my bike, leaned back, said a prayer, and followed her exact line, thankfully without crashing. This is what example means – to walk in the precise footsteps, to not deviate from the path. It means that Jesus' suffering is the way of discipleship, the way by which Christians live out the gospel in our lives. It is this kind of following in Jesus' footsteps which leads us to God, Peter writes in 3:18.

What does it mean to follow in the footsteps of Christ? Peter gives us a model in verses 22-25:

1. It means to suffer. Jesus Christ, who was without sin, who did no wrong, who did not speak lies or deceit suffered unjustly. We will suffer unjustly. The suffering that Peter speaks about is not suffering from sickness or illness or our own poor decisions. It is suffering for doing good.

2. Following in the footsteps of Jesus means to not retaliate or make threats when we suffer. It means we are to be careful about our verbal response when we suffer. When someone is treated unjustly, it is most tempting to respond in a verbally abusive manner or to make threats. Following in Jesus' footsteps means that sometimes silence is best. Peter tells the readers what not to do: retaliate and make threats. But then Peter instructs the readers on what to do: trust God. The irony is not lost: Christians are to keep on doing good even though the reason they suffer is because society questions whether faith in Christ is even good. Yet we are called to trust God. Peter emphasizes this point about trusting God because Jesus' unjust suffering is easily interpreted to mean that God had abandoned Jesus. On the contrary, unjust suffering was God's mysterious way to accomplish the redemption of humanity. For us to suffer unjustly is for us to share the nature of Jesus' suffering.
3. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus so that we may live in righteousness. Peter personalizes the message of Isaiah, noting that Christ bore our sins, bore my sins. The purpose of Christ bearing judgment for our sin has ethical implication for us: verse 24 so that having no part in sins, we might live in righteousness.
4. Lastly, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus so that we are healed. For Peter, the past sufferings of Christ is what we as believers currently experience. The present glory of Jesus is the future glory of those who follow in the steps of the suffering Messiah.

Peter's teaching on following the footsteps of Jesus is held together by verses 21 and 25. Peter concludes this passage by using sheep and shepherding imagery. Somehow, walking in Jesus' footsteps through unjust suffering is the shepherd's path of redemption, of healing, of restoration. Unjust suffering is to be expected by the Christian community. Peter has used Isaiah's words to

explain to us that suffering unjustly because of faithfulness to Christ is actually evidence that, like the Messiah, we are chosen by God. Unjust suffering is not evidence that God has forsaken you; to the contrary, it is evidence that God has chosen you. That is the living hope into which we have been born.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Peter shows us that to live as a follower of Jesus Christ is to suffer unjustly, is to not retaliate or make threats when we suffer but instead is to trust God, is to live in righteousness, and ultimately is to receive the promised hope of glory and healing.

As we have studied the original text from 1 Peter this morning as readers of the first century would have heard it, hopefully we realize that Peter is calling Christians to live out the gospel in ways that are culturally, geographically, and historically appropriate. How we relate to others in our relationships – Peter describes the relationship of citizen to government, of slave to master, of wife to husband – is a call to discipleship and transformation. Because of this, for example, we can reject slavery, something neither Peter nor the New Testament does, because our social order rejects the practice of slavery. Christian marriages are different in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where women have more status and privilege than women of the first century. Christian men and Christian women are called to live out their marriages in a way that honours the gospel in today's social order. May the Holy Spirit empower us all to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, living out the call to discipleship in all of our relationships. Amen!