

1 Peter 3

3:1-7 Peter continues his instructions to behave in accordance with the example of Christ by addressing wives. At this time, women are considered the lesser of the sexes. The husband dictates to the household what their religious belief is, and so in the case of wives who have come to Christ, Peter says they have a duty to walk in the ways of Christ so that they might eventually win their husbands in faith as well. For the unbelieving husband, the fact that they see their wife behaving in a way that is so honorable to them – choosing to serve with kindness and gentleness – will ultimately result in their salvation as well. Peter especially exhorts these women to “respectful and pure conduct.” Peter, much like James, places much greater emphasis on our actions than on our words.

Women are to focus far more on the beauty of their hearts than they are to focus on their external beauty, Peter says. As it has been for many millennia, the pressure of society was to be a beautiful wife – someone the husband could proudly display because of her external beauty. We see a similar episode in Esther, where King Xerxes wishes for his first wife to come out simply so he can show off how beautiful she is. When Vashti refuses, she brings great dishonor on the king. Her inner beauty is apparently not quite as extraordinary as her outer beauty. But for the Christ follower, although outer beauty is great, it is not nearly as important as what is within. God is far more focused on inner beauty than anything else, a sentiment which echoes the anointing of David in 1 Samuel 16 (“Man looks at the external things, but the Lord looks at the heart”).

Peter tops all of this off with a brief reference to the Old Testament – if the exiles wish to see an example of this focus on inner beauty, they need look no further than Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Her willingness to defer to her husband gave great honor to Abraham. Each of the women to whom this is written would have held Sarah in high esteem. As Jews, they are all descended from her! As such, they are to look to her as their exemplar.

Finally, Peter addresses husbands. The instructions to husbands are quite interesting here, as our honor for our wives is considered a necessity not just for our everyday lives. Rather, Peter outright says that a husband’s “prayers may... be hindered” if they are not showing honor to their wives! Where does Peter get this idea? It is entirely possible that Peter derives this from the fact that God favors the oppressed and overlooked, and when a husband chooses not to treat their wife with honor, they do not demonstrate kindness to the ones overlooked by society. As such, they do not appropriately reflect the attitude of God Himself. This would naturally hinder their requests to God, as they have chosen not to act in accordance with His ways.

3:8-12 Regardless of whether one is a husband, wife, or single person, Peter’s words here apply to us all. We would tend to think of Peter’s exhortations here in two basic senses: a focus on the mind and a focus on the heart. We are called to unity and humility of mind, and to sympathetic, loving, and tender hearts. Peter’s words here almost seem to follow an ABCBA pattern:

- A. Unity of Mind
- B. Sympathy
- C. Brotherly Love

- B. Tender Heart (Again, sympathy)
- A. Humble Mind

If this is the case, then Peter intends for his readers to notice that love for our brothers remains at the center of it all. Out of our love will naturally spring forth tenderness/sympathy, as well as unity. I have placed unity and humility on the same level here because in order for us to find ourselves unified in our minds, we must first be humble enough to recognize that we are not the authority on everything. It is our humility which opens the door to unity.

Following this, Peter launches into a threefold focus on living in Christ. Those who follow Christ do not repay 1. evil for evil, or 2. reviling for reviling, but rather 3. bless others to obtain a blessing. Christians are to walk in such a way as to accept the evils done to us, choosing to forgive as Christ forgave and bless instead of curse. The implication of Peter's statement that we "bless... that [we] may obtain a blessing" is that we bless others specifically because we know God will ultimately bless us for our efforts.

This idea is further expanded upon by the statement in vv.10-12, which encourages believers to keep [their] tongue[s] from evil" and their "lips from speaking deceit." We walk in righteousness because God specifically blesses those who do so, while He turns away from those who walk in wickedness.

3:13-17 Peter seems to echo Paul once again, as Paul reminds believers that "against such things there is no law" when speaking of the Fruit of the Spirit. There are very few who stand against those who do what is right. Yet as always, there are exceptions to the rule. Some will, of course, persecute believers even in their righteousness. We are going to be persecuted, but we have no reason to fear those who persecute. We are victors in Christ Jesus, and His righteousness becomes our own when we are in Him. We remember that our faith in Christ leads us to a place where the persecution we may face is nothing compared to the surpassing glory which is ours in Him.

In v.15, Peter encourages believers to have readiness – and again we see a parallel between Peter's words and the armor of God which Paul describes in Ephesians 6. Where Paul tells believers to have "feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the knowledge of the Gospel of peace," Peter will tell believers to be "prepared to make a defense" for their faith. We have hope in Christ Jesus which will inspire questions in the world. We are to do this, however, "with gentleness and respect." Peter reminds us that the point is not to shove our faith down others' throats; rather, we are to speak to others with gentleness. Many of us have had a conversation with another in which they spoke harshly to us and insisted that we needed Jesus (for many of us, even while we were Christ followers!). Yet Peter insists that we are not to follow this method, but are rather to deal with others in grace as Christ did with us.

When we speak with others in grace, there is nothing they can bring against us. We are pure of heart and others can bring nothing but false accusations. Eventually, those who bring these false accusations will be exposed for their slander and be shamed before the world. One of the things the apostles understood well was that suffering was to be expected for the Christ follower. Our suffering in Christ is actually for the benefit of others, in that it allows them to see the joy within us in the face of the trials of this world.

3:18-22 The reason we take our suffering without retaliation is because we are people of Christ Himself. Christ is our model, and He bore our sin without complaint or violence. In doing this, Christ made it plain to us that we too are to take punishment, even when it is undeserved. It is perhaps the case that our suffering will ultimately lead others to Christ just as His sacrifice led us to Himself. The words of Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" ring true – "The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still."

Peter goes on to equate our death to sin and rising to new life in Christ with the sacrament of water baptism and the deliverance of Noah's family. God's method of bringing His people through the dark waters of sin is in the person of Jesus Christ. Peter makes an interesting point that many theologians today would deny, including the United Methodist Church – that in baptism, something salvific takes place. The UMC would declare that baptism, although important, does not save human beings. Peter, however, will declare that "Baptism, which corresponds to [Noah's ark], now saves you..." The source of our salvation remains Jesus Christ resurrected; the method He apparently chooses to use to solidify that salvation seems to be baptism.