

First Letter of Peter . . . Catholic Scripture Study

Memory Verse: *For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit . . .*

(1 Peter 3:18)

Week 4 - Wives and Husbands (1 Peter 3:1-7)

I. OVERVIEW (1 PETER 3:1-7)

Peter continues his instructions to the Christians of Asia minor in how to live out their Christian calling practically and concretely.

Peter began this section regarding *order in relationships* with a general exhortation to avoid evil and do good (2:11-12). He then specified three relationships in which Christians should defer to what he (Peter) regards as legitimate authority.

1. Everyone to civil authorities (2:13-17);
2. Household servants to their masters (2:18-25); and
3. Wives to husbands (3:1-7).

This is the **principle of subordination** or **submission** in Christian relationships.

We come now to the third and last of the special relationships involving subordination, namely, that between wives and husbands.

This passage (3:1-7), along with St. Paul's exhortation to Christian wives and husbands in Eph 5: 22-25 and Col 3:18-19, raises a lot of questions today, and even a few hackles (feathers).

II. SUBORDINATION

No text in the New Testament jars our sensibilities more than the phrase in 1 Peter 3:1: **wives, be submissive to your husbands.**

The New American Bible translates the word “submissive” (or “be subject to”) as “subordinate,” which is a better translation of the Greek word used in the NT to describe this aspect of the husband-wife relationship.

“Subjection” or “submission” can convey the sense of domination, whereas here Peter calls the wives to place themselves voluntarily in proper order, that is, to be subordinate to their husbands.

The word “subordinate” does not carry with it a notion of inferior value. A subordinate could be more valuable in many ways than a person over him or her. Nor does the word carry with it a notion of oppression or the use of force for domination, but it is explicitly related to “**obedience**” in this text.

The word can be used to describe an oppressive relationship, but its normal use is for relationships in which the subordination involved is either neutral or good.

“Subordination” simply refers to the order of a relationship in which one person, the subordinate, depends upon another person for direction.

- The purpose of this subordination is to allow those in the relationship to function together in unity. A body must have a head to function properly.

Read: 1 Peter 3:1-7

[1] Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives,
[2] when they see your reverent and chaste behavior.

[3] Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of fine clothing, [4] but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.

[5] So once the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves and were submissive to their husbands,

[6] as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are now her children if you do right and let nothing terrify you.

[7] Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered.

A. Subordination as a Means to Conversion (3:1-2)

Peter speaks first to the **wives**, saying that they **should be subordinate** to their **husbands**, even though some of them may still be unbelievers (those who **do not obey the word**).

The teaching on this question is plainly stated: the wife should subordinate herself to her husband – whether Christian or unbeliever (pagan).

- In fact, she may be able to win her unbelieving husband to Christ by her virtuous conduct, as St. Monica did with her husband, who was an unbeliever.

The typical marital virtues of women of the ancient world, **obedience**, **reverence**, and **chastity**, are outlined here by Peter (1-2).

- Virtuous Christian wives who are loving and supportive may be instrumental in the conversion of their unbelieving husbands.

This does not mean that Peter is telling the wife to do whatever her husband tells her, especially if it is wrong. The passage deals with normal, everyday situations, not with situations of special difficulty (see 1 Cor. 7:12-16).

B. Excessive Concern with Appearance

Let not yours be the outward adorning . . . Preoccupation with physical appearance is discouraged. In imitation of **holy women** (v.5) in the past Christian wives are to cultivate the interior life (v.4) instead of being excessively concerned with their appearance (v.3).

- This should not be understood as a blanket condemnation of all jewelry, makeup, or nice clothing.

Rather, Peter is contrasting a preoccupation with outward adornment, common in his day as in ours, with true interior beauty which is the hidden character of the heart (the inner core of the person), expressed in the imperishable beauty of a **gentle** and **quiet spirit** (calm disposition).

- It is this inner and hidden beauty – not outward adornment – that is **very precious in God's sight**.

Not as men's sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart (1 Sam 16:7).

C. Sarah and the Holy Women

Peter turns to the example of Sarah and the holy women of Israel as models for Christian wives.

Their “adornment” was that of the inner person: for this is how **the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves and were submissive to their husbands**.

- Sarah herself is offered as a prime example of a submissive wife, for she **obeyed Abraham, calling him “lord.”**

But Sarah is no doormat: she is a figure of great strength and courage. She was not afraid to speak boldly to Abraham, who complied with her demands on at least two occasions (Gen 16:2; 21:12).

- Her deference to Abraham in no way compromised her strength of personality and character.

Peter concludes by emphasizing the link between Christian wives and Sarah: ***you are her children if you do right and let nothing terrify you.***

By imitating the qualities of Sarah – by doing what is good – these mostly Gentile women have now become her spiritual daughters.

D. Fearless Subordination

But what does Peter mean by ***and let nothing terrify you?***

The subordination Peter is recommending for these women is not to be based on fear of their husbands' anger or any other kind of intimidation.

Because these women are mindful of God and hope in him, they are free to offer a fearless subordination in imitation of the holy women of old.

E. The Role of Christian Husbands

Peter now turns to address the Christian husbands, instructing them to ***live considerately with your wives***, that is, to be respectful and understanding toward their wives – to treat them with consideration.

The husband, then, is meant to show awareness, consideration, and understanding in the way that he lives with his wife.

Peter also tells husbands to ***honour*** their wives and he gives three reasons why they should do this:

1. Wives are of ***the weaker sex***,
2. They ***are joint heirs of the grace of life, and***
3. ***In order that your prayers may not be hindered.***

What does all this mean? Let us look at each one separately.

F. The Weaker Sex

There are two common interpretations given the wife's "weakness."

One view would understand weakness in reference to the fact that Eve was deceived. "Weakness" would then mean the woman's susceptibility to deception, perhaps especially spiritual deception.

The second interpretation understands weakness as simply a reference to a woman's physical weakness in comparison to man.

Whichever interpretation is correct the passage refers to a tendency for men not to respect women, and therefore urges a husband to take care to show that he respects and honours his wife.

G. Joint Heirs of Eternal Life

But the most profound reason for husbands to show ***honor*** to their wives is because their wives are joint heirs of the grace or gift of eternal life.

- Since husband and wife ***are joint heirs of the grace of life*** the wife should be treated with full respect and dignity.

H. So That Your Prayers May Not Be Hindered

This is the third reason given by Peter as to why husbands should honour their wives.

The Christian husband and wife were expected to pray together. Disunity in marriage would obstruct the worship of God and hinder family prayer, especially that of the husband.

I. Summary of 1 Peter 3:7

In summary, 1 Peter 3:7 urges the husband to honour his wife, even though he may be tempted to disrespect her because she is ***the weaker sex***.

He should honor her because she is equal to him in what is most important to both of them, their life in the Lord. Thus there should be harmony and unity between them in such a way that they can come before the Lord and pray as one.

- A husband's prayers will go unanswered if he fails to honor and cherish his wife.

III. EXHORTATION TO UNITY, LOVE, AND HUMILITY (3:8-12)

A. Overview

Peter ends this section on order in relationships just the way he began, with an exhortation to everyone in the Church.

Having finished his instructions on three specific relationships, Peter concludes his teaching on the practical life of a Christian with a general call to unity, and love, and humility.

The exhortation ends with a quotation from Psalm 34 (vs. 12 – 16); a psalm he quoted earlier (cf. 2:3).

Love is the virtue that must govern the Christian life.

Read: 1 Peter 3:8-12

[8] Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind.

[9] Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing.

[10] For "He that would love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil

**and his lips from speaking guile;
[11] let him turn away from evil and do right;
let him seek peace and pursue it.
[12] For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those that do evil."**

A. Qualities of the Christian Community (3:8)

What are the qualities we most need for life in the Christian community?

Peter names five characteristics that ought to mark how **all** members in the Church relate to others in the Christian community.

- We are called to ***be of one mind, sympathetic, loving towards one another, compassionate, humble.***

The Christian calling is very demanding!

There seems to be an ordering or grouping of these qualities: 1 & 5; 2 & 4; with 3 in the centre. It looks like this:

1. Unity of mind;
2. Sympathetic
3. Brotherly love
4. Compassionate
5. Humility of mind.

Unity and humility of mind (1&5) are like sentries, defending our oneness from the attacks of division, arrogance, and strife. We require a new way of thinking and a transformation of our minds (Rom 12:2) if we are to live as God's people.

The next group (2&4) is marked by sympathetic and tender-hearted affection toward one another. We are to be a family that shows mercy to one another especially in weakness.

At the heart and core of our common life is the love we have for one another as brothers and sisters (3). As Paul says, **“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony** (Col 3:14).

B. Relations with Those outside the Christian Community (3:9)

Peter now turns his attention to how we relate to those outside of God's people when we receive unfair abuse.

While committing evil and giving insults can occur within the Christian community, Peter seems to be primarily concerned in this letter with attacks that come from outside the Church.

C. A Blessing for a Curse

Do not return evil for evil, or insult for insult, but, on the contrary, bless.

- When evil is done to us, we are to do no evil in return.

When we are unfairly insulted, we are not to match insult for insult. Peter's use of the term “insult” directs our attention back to 2:23: *“When [Christ] was insulted, he returned no insult.”*

Rather than giving abuse, you are to return a blessing, so ***that you might obtain a blessing.***

- When we return a blessing for abuse or a curse we inherit a blessing!

Peter urges us to call down God's blessing upon our abusers rather than calling down a curse on their heads.

The blessing we inherit primarily refers to our life with God in the age to come, but also includes God's blessings upon us in this life as well.

- We are also called to *pray for those who treat us unjustly*.

Peter's words clearly reflect Jesus' own saying on non-retaliation: "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you*" (Luke 6:27-20).

Peter closes the general exhortation by once again citing Psalm 34 vs. 12-16. This extensive quotation indicates just how important Psalm 34 is for understanding Peter's teaching on the Christian way of life.

It instructs us *how* we are to live in the household of God and how we are to relate to those outside of God's household.

The Christian Attitude toward Suffering (1 Peter 3:13- 4:19)

Memory Verse: *Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence;*

This section comprises one long exhortation to the faithful to be ready to suffer for the sake of Christ.

Peter reminds them that every baptized person is called to share in the Paschal mystery of Christ, that is, in his sufferings and in his glorification.

Just as Jesus, after suffering unjustly was glorified (3:18-22), so too those who now suffer for Christ will have a part in his glorious triumph (4:13-14).

Peter gives this exhortation to the whole Church and provides one of the most concrete and inspiring accounts in the Bible of how all of us are called to give testimony to the hope that is in us, but with gentleness, always ready to suffer for the sake of Christ.

I. FAITHFULNESS IN SUFFERING FOR CHRIST (3:13-17)

A. Overview

The following verses act as an introduction to the central theme of this section.

They seem to be directed to those in the Christian community who are surprised to encounter persecution despite doing good (v. 13).

Opposition should not dismay them; their slanderers will come to realize their mistake (v.16).

Read: 1 Peter 3:13-17

[13] Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right?

[14] But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,

[15] but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence;

[16] and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

[17] For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong.

B. Suffering For the Sake of Righteousness

Peter begins with a rhetorical question: ***Now who is going to harm you if you are zealous for what is right?***

The obvious sense of Peter's question is this: if God has established rulers to punish evildoers and approve those who do good (2:14), then who is going to harm you if you are indeed doing good?

The implied answer is of course "no one."

But we all know from experience that this is not true, and so does Peter. In fact, he will acknowledge in the next sentence that Christians will indeed suffer for doing good: **but even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.**

Christians are blessed not just when they suffer harm, but especially when they suffer "because of righteousness," that is, in imitation of Christ who also suffered for doing good.

C. Be not afraid

Peter continues: you are not to **be afraid or terrified with fear** of those who harm you unjustly for the Lord will be your comfort and strength – just as He is for us today.

To shrink in fear from those who abuse us verbally and physically is a natural human response.

- We need supernatural faith and hope to resist falling into fear.

Jesus himself tells us that we should not fear those who can only harm the body: "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but after that can do no more" (NAB Luke 12:4).

D. Reverence Christ as Lord

By calling Christ "**Lord**," Peter reveals his belief that Jesus Christ is fully God. Lord (*Kyrios*), is a name proper to God; and they are told to "glorify" or "reverence" Him. That is, render him the worship that is due to God alone.

- Even in the midst of difficulties the Christian should not deny Christ, but praise God.

II. MAKE A DEFENSE

The second step in our response to unjust abuse is this: ***Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.*** The word “defense” (Gk. *apologia*) is the basis of the English word “apologetics,” which involves explaining and defending Christian truth (Acts 22:1).

To understand what Peter means by “your hope,” we need to go right back to the beginning of the letter to recall the living hope into which we have been born anew in Christ (1:3).

- Our hope is the Gospel of Jesus Christ lived and proclaimed in great joy.

A. Evangelization – Making a Defense!

What should Christians be ready to explain? The reason for their hope!

In other words, we are not just to give a reason for why we believe, but be ready to give a *full verbal account* of what we believe. Up till now Peter has stressed the importance of our ***conduct*** and the ***example of our lives***.

Now he adds to this the importance of our ***speech***. Our way of life will provoke questions from non-Christians. When they ask, we need to be ready to give an account of the hope within us.

Peter is describing here nothing less than the task of evangelization that belongs to every Christian – each of us needs to be ready to explain the Good News to others.

As the popular saying goes: we have to walk the walk and talk the talk!

- But we have to do so with gentleness and reverence.

Reflection and Application (3:13-17)

Peter has given us a timeless, eloquent call to be always ready to give an account of the hope that is within each of us.

The pressing question is whether we have such a “hope” that is alive within us, and whether we’re equipped to explain that hope.

Our hope must be personal, based on an encounter with Christ; so that we can witness to the “incredible and glorious joy” (1:8) that arises from the gift of living hope we have received.

Preparation for Week 5 Christ's Victory through Suffering (1Peter 3:18-22)

1. Read: ICSB, First Peter, Chapter 3: 18-22 and Christ and “The Spirits in Prison” – pg 36
2. Review all Study Questions on Chapter 3, pg 40 in ICSB
3. Look up Scripture references.
4. Study *Memory Verse*.