

## Week 14 - On the Subject of Wives Being Subject - 1Peter 3:1-6

### Scripture Reading: Proverbs 31:10-31

#### Introduction

In planning for this morning's sermon, I thought about donning a helmet and a flak vest and seeing if the deacons could erect a barricade of sandbags in front of the pulpit because, in our text this morning, Peter tells wives to submit, or be subject to, their husbands

And that's not exactly a popular thing to say these days

A wise person has observed that the pedestrian has the right of way and a man is the head of his household, and both of them are safe as long as they don't try to prove it.

But seriously, this is a difficult passage to expound upon in modern-day America because it goes against the grain of the independent, demand equality and take a back seat to no one ethos of our culture

It's difficult for us to willingly be subject to authorities

It's hard to be subject to government when we don't agree with it

It's hard to be subject to a boss who mistreats us

And it's hard for wives to be subject to their husbands even when their husbands are seeking to be godly - let alone when they are married to a husband who is unsaved or ungodly

It's been that way ever since the fall of mankind as we see God say to Eve in **Genesis 3:16** –

*“Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.”*

Adam's headship as husband was established back when God made Eve from Adam's rib as we read in Genesis 2 -

So we know that the headship of husbands isn't a part of the curse

However, the fact that submitting to that God-ordained order became much more difficult is a part of the curse

Because wives now have an innate desire within their fallen nature to master their husbands that they must fight against and men are likewise prone to demand and force their rule upon their wives

So that God's intention for love and harmony between husband and wife has largely devolved into a joint struggle for dominance

And when we recognize the source of the conflict it becomes easier to understand how even a devout, godly woman might still have the tendency to chafe at God's command for her to be subject to her husband

As we approach today's passage we need to recall that Peter has been instructing his original readers on how to be examples to those around them as they sojourned on this earth

As we read in **1Peter 2:11-12** -

*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*

And then in verse 13 of chapter 2 he began his call to submission to “every human institution” “for the Lords sake” and then he went on to specify being subject to governmental authorities and slaves being subject to their masters

Now, in chapter 3 verse 1 he begins with the word “likewise” which means “similar to” and logically takes us back to the topic of submission

So, once again, we need to stress that being subject is not the same thing as being completely obedient because Peter could have said that had he meant that

“Be subject” means to recognize the established order and place oneself under the authority above them

And, while obedience is a part of being subject, there are limits to obedience that we have looked at as they came up

It’s a voluntary submission that is based on one’s own recognition of God’s established order of which Christ is the ultimate and perfect example as he was and is subject to the Father

Therefore, there is nothing demeaning or degrading in the idea of being subject to authority and accepting God’s established order in any of the previous examples and certainly not in marriage

I selected this morning’s Scripture reading hoping that we would readily see that a godly woman can be strong, productive, and instructive all while being subject to her husband

Further, as we will come to see, it’s God’s will that every believer is properly subject regardless of whether they are male or female and while we are limiting our study today to wives we will see that God has plenty to say to husbands when we get to verse 7

Still, Peter’s command here raises questions just as we had with submission to government such as what does be subject mean to the wife whose husband pushes her to sin or when the husband is abusive or whether there is ever a time when a wife can speak up if she thinks her husband is wrong

The passage before us divides rather neatly into three equal parts with verses 1-2 containing Peter’s **exhortation**

Verses 3-4 telling how the wife should present or **exhibit** herself

And verses 5-6 providing an **example** of the kind of life the Christ-following wife should lead

Let’s begin by looking at verses 1-2 and the exhortation [**1Peter 3:1-2**]

*Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct.*

## **I. Exhortation**

When Peter begins his exhortation with “likewise” he can’t possibly mean that wives are to be subject to their husbands in the same way or in every way that they are to be similar to the servants he has just addressed

It should be clear that the husband/wife relationship is considerably different than the master/slave relationship

What Peter means is that the motive of all the groups should be the same meaning they are being subject for the Lord’s sake

That the extent of application is the same meaning they are to be subject whether their husbands are good or bad

The attitude of the wives should also be the same meaning they should have reverent fear of God

And, should she suffer wrong from her husband when doing right, it is commendable before God if she bears it patiently

So we see that wives are to willingly and voluntarily place themselves under their husband’s authority in the marriage

However, it must always be remembered that submission to authority is often consistent with equality in importance, dignity, and honor

After all, Jesus was subject to his parents and to God the Father and all Christ-followers, who we have seen are highly valued by God, are commanded to be subject to often unbelieving governmental authorities and masters

In the case of wives just as in those cases the command for wives to be subject to their husbands should never be taken as an implication of inferiority of either personhood or spirituality or of lesser importance

As I have said repeatedly being subject may involve obeying the orders of the one in authority

But in a healthy marriage it is more likely that the husband will give advice and counsel or have an opinion about the course of action to be followed

The apostle Paul demonstrates this in **Philemon 1:8-9** when he wrote to Philemon about Onesimus –

*Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you*

An attitude of being subject to the husband's authority is therefore much more than giving and obeying orders

And it will be demonstrated in numerous words and actions each day which reflect deference to the husband's leadership and acknowledgement of his ultimate responsibility before God to make decisions that affect the family

But this should never be seen as a means to stifle discussion and input from the wife - it would be sheer foolishness to ignore the wisdom and counsel of one's partner

All of that informs us as we read Peter's exhortation, *"Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands"*

Then Peter gives a reason or purpose for this submission in the last half of verse 1 [**1Peter 3:1b-2**]

*"So that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives when they see your respectful and pure conduct"*

The first thing we want to settle is what Peter means when he says some husbands might *"not obey the word"*

This is typically understood as meaning that some of the husbands might be unbelievers

And while many commentators and preachers treat Peter's exhortation as if it were given only to women whose husbands were unbelievers, the text seems to indicate the opposite

Those two little words, *"even if"*, that Peter includes suggests that this would have been an unexpected or uncommon occurrence - or at least the condition in a minority of marriages

The meaning behind Peter's "not believe" is a deliberate disobedience and a conscience resistance to acceptance and it suggests a pattern of life marked by disobedience not just to the gospel but also to God's standards in other areas of life

It carries the strong sense of active disobedience to the standards of God found in Scripture and even rebellion against them in some cases

And I believe that same stiff-necked, stubborn attitude is too often present even among husbands who claim to be Christ-followers concerning some parts of the Word

Of course, those attitudes may well be indicative of actual unbelief also - we just don't know

Certainly, none of us obeys as well as we would like, and we all struggle against the flesh - that's not what's in view here

However, if a person is willfully resistant to the teaching of Scripture and ungodly in their conduct, they should probably take a long, hard look at themselves and seriously consider whether they are indeed Christ-followers after all

But in either case, whether the husband is unbelieving or willfully unyielding, Peter says the conduct of their wife could be enough to win them over

And Peter's emphasis on conduct over words doesn't mean that Christian wives should never talk about the gospel to their husbands, but he does indicate that the means God will most likely use will be their conduct and not their words

Of course, we know that no one can be saved unless the gospel message is presented to them

**Romans 10:14** makes that very clear –

*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*

However, the harsh reality is that Christian wives preaching to their husbands tends to drive them from the truth rather than win them over

And Peter is saying to those wives who have given the gospel to their husbands repeatedly to stop talking about it lest their husbands label it nagging and instead quietly live the Word of God in front of their husbands

And Peter next goes into the kind of conduct on the part of the wife that can win a recalcitrant husband

## II. Exhibition

First, we see that **attitude** is paramount - the wife must be respectful toward her husband

As I was thinking about this I was reminded of this Dennis the Menace comic that had the caption, "I may be sitting on the outside, but I'm standing on the inside" [Dennis-the-Menace] -

Unfortunately, the caption wasn't included in this image and it was the only one I could find

That attitude might be compliance but it isn't being subject in a biblical sense - we might label it "defiant compliance"

But submission in the biblical sense involves an attitude of respect and recognition that the person in authority has been put there by God and their position includes responsibility that the one who is subject doesn't bear

Being under authority is a blessing that not only gives one protection but also power as the Centurion said to Jesus in **Matthew 8:9** –

*For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."*

Just as when we looked at the servants who were commanded to be subject to their masters and likened that relationship to an employer/employee relationship today and said there is a time to speak up the wife can state her point of view and even do so strongly as long as she has a submissive and respectful attitude

I can't help but think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as he pleaded with his heavenly Father so forcefully that he sweated blood while all the while being submissive to the will of the Father

So wives, go ahead and put forth your case, being subject doesn't prohibit it - you can disagree without being disagreeable

But remember that your choice of words and your tone of voice will reveal whether you respect your husband or not and you must accept that, in the end, God has placed him in authority and accept his leadership

Second, Peter says the wife must engage in "*pure conduct*"

The word "pure" means "without moral blemish or defect" so we understand this to mean that the wife must be morally pure and living in obedience to God

This covers a whole lot of ground from not being dishonest, deceitful, manipulative, and seductive in order to get her way as well as to not being flirtatious with other men in an attempt to make her husband jealous and so forth

Then, in verses 3-4, Peter says that the wife should be more concerned with her inner beauty than outward appearances

He writes [**1Peter 3:3-4**] –

*Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.*

"Adorning" refers to that which is the focus of attention for one's attractiveness - the thing a person uses to make themselves beautiful to others

And Peter says definitively that Christ-following wives should rely on the inward qualities of life rather than external adorning for their beauty

This doesn't mean that external appearance doesn't matter and a wife can just let herself go and neglect her appearance - it means that her emphasis must be on the inner person

Jesus criticized the Pharisees for focusing on the external and neglecting the internal and in **Matthew 23:27** he called them “*whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness*”

I need to emphasize that Peter isn’t forbidding a Christ-following wife from doing her best to look her best he’s simply saying that outward appearance should not be more important to them than the characteristics of inner beauty

After all, if we say that a Christian wife cannot fix her hair and wear jewelry then we have to follow through and say that she cannot wear clothing because Peter gives equal emphasis to all of them and there is no qualifier that restricts the type of clothing to fancy or costly clothing as Paul does in **1Timothy 2:9**

Outward beauty fades and clothing wears out in time but Peter says the inner qualities that the wife should focus on cultivating are “imperishable” which speaks of heavenly realities that will not fade away

The beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit - gentle meaning temperate, patient, and under control and quiet meaning not silent but tranquil, without turmoil, and undisturbed - the gentle and quiet spirit will last for all eternity

The authentic, defining hidden ornamentation of the inner life that pleases God can’t help but show through and it is attractive even to unbelievers so that by its exhibition the believing wife might win her disobedient husband

Next, in verses 5-6, Peter gives an example from the Old Testament of the kind of character he is talking about

### III. Example

Let’s look at those verses together [**1Peter 3:5-6**] –

*For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.*

Although Peter specifically mentions Sarah in verse 6, the plural “women” refers generally to godly women of the Old Testament who continued to hope in God over a period of time and adorned themselves with a gentle and quiet spirit and were submissive to their husbands

So that we can rightly determine that quiet confidence in God and God’s sovereign control of events produces in a woman the imperishable beauty of a right spirit and enables her to be subject to her husband

This is because her confidence in God assures her that doing so will not lead to harm to her well-being or her personhood

Then in verse 6, Peter turns his attention specifically to Sarah, Abraham’s wife

Peter doesn’t specify any particular time when Sarah called Abraham “lord” but we do have one time recorded for us in Genesis 18 when the Lord appeared to Abraham and told him he and Sarah were going to have a son together

Sarah happened to be eavesdropping on the conversation from inside the tent and in **Genesis 18:12** we read –

*So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?”*

Now here’s what’s significant about it - she didn’t say it out loud; she said it to herself

Of course, that was no barrier to the Lord because he knew Sarah’s innermost thoughts just as he does with all of us

But the point we can easily miss is that her inner dialogue reveals that this is how Sarah truly thought of Abraham

She wasn’t just deferential to Abraham’s face - she truly saw herself as under his authority and was willing to go where he said God was leading without fear of ultimate harm because of her faith in God

Sarah was willing to leave her home, her family, her friends, and her land to follow her husband and go to an unknown place - she submitted to Abraham in her heart and in her actions and so became an example of godly submission for all women who follow Christ

And Peter says that wives who do likewise are the true daughters of Sarah

Of course, Sarah was not always a paragon of virtue as a reading of the Genesis narrative makes clear so Peter qualifies his statement a bit by saying “if you do good” showing that emulating Sarah in all things isn’t what he has in mind

However, not being afraid of anything that is frightening isn’t a condition of being a daughter of Sarah but a consequence of being submissive to one’s husband out of reverence for and faith in God

## **Conclusion**

There are some pretty standard questions that regularly come up when considering this topic that I want to address as we close

### **First, what about if a husband attempts to lead his wife to do wrong?**

Just as we saw when we considered Peter’s command for all Christ-followers to submit to governmental authorities, being subject doesn’t mean blind obedience and we must always be faithful to the higher principle of obeying God rather than men

And just like when a Christ-follower has to disobey government to honor God, a wife who must do so must do so only after making certain she is being asked to go against God and then demur respectfully and peaceably while being willing to patiently and quietly suffer for it knowing that God is in control of the matter

### **Second, what about if the husband is abusive?**

This is a serious one but I have to believe that Peter’s inclusion of husbands who do not obey the word allows for husbands who may be abusive

Let me hasten to say that no wife has to suffer physical abuse at her husband’s hand

We live in a time and place where there are laws against battery and any wife who suffers physical harm should avail herself of the protection the law affords her and do what she has to do to protect herself

However, if there is no physical danger and the abuse is of the verbal or even emotional kind, I believe that falls under the command to be subject

Remember, we have just seen Peter tell servants that, when mindful of God, it’s a gracious thing to endure sorrows while suffering unjustly

And continuing to display a gentle and quiet spirit with respect and pure conduct in the face of verbal and emotional abuse is a powerful witness - that may not be a popular thing to say but I believe it’s what God’s Word says

### **Third, can a wife ever speak up for herself or express disapproval or does she have to be a doormat in marriage?**

Being subject is an outward sign of meekness and meekness is not weakness; it’s power under control

I have to say, it has to be tough for wives to submit to their husbands at times because we can be boneheads and boneheads are hard to follow

I think one definition of a fool would have to be a husband who never seeks his wife’s advice, never heeds her feelings, and never takes advantage of her wisdom

As a wife, can you point out how you think your husband is in error with respect?

Can you make your point and leave it alone and not continue to come back to the matter from a different angle or attempt to wear your husband down by nagging him until he relents?

Can you do it with a heart that allows your husband to still make the decision you believe is wrong and submit to his leadership?

If the answer to those questions is “yes” then of course you can speak your mind and you should because your husband needs your perspective and, if he loves you, he will want to hear it

**The last question that often comes up is, what if my husband isn't living up to what the Bible says he should do?**

We will get to what God has to say to husbands through the pen of Peter in our next sermon from 1Peter but the plain answer is that the command Peter gives to wives isn't conditional on what their husbands do or don't do

You are responsible for living as God wants you to live and you have to leave your husband in God's hands

After all, Peter's command to wives to be subject takes into account that some of the husbands he is referring to are disobedient to God's Word

The bottom line is that wives are to be subject to their husband's God-given authority even when their husbands are wrong as long as it doesn't result in sin and your goal as a wife should be to be so winsome that your husband is won over to follow the Savior

Let's pray

**Proverbs 31:10-31 (page 552)**

An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.  
The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.  
She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.  
She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.  
She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar.  
She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens.  
She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.  
She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong.  
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.  
She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.  
She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.  
She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet.  
She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.  
Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.  
She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant.  
Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.  
She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.  
She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.  
Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:  
“Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”  
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.  
Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.