

# 1 Peter 2:11-3:7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ]     1 Peter 2:11-3:7 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 honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject, for the Lord's sake, to every human institution, whether it be to the Emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil, and to praise those who do good.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Honour everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, honour the Emperor. Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it, if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?

[ 1 : 11 ]     But, if, when you do good and suffer for it, you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin, and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

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.

Do not let your adorning be external, the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewellery, 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.

[ 2 : 23 ]     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.

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

From the second half of 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter presents his hearers, seemingly new or young converts, with the pattern of behaviour that should mark them out from those around them.

He begins with a more general statement. They are supposed to understand themselves as the sort of persons that they are, sojourners and exiles. As sojourners, they are people who are dwelling temporarily, and as exiles, they are not citizens of the place where they are dwelling, people belonging to that land.

Rather, they belong to another place. Their citizenship lies elsewhere. Such an understanding is paradigmatic for the people of God. You see the same thing in Philippians chapter 3 verse 20.

[ 3 : 29 ] But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Or in Hebrews chapter 11 verses 9 to 10, By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. In the very early Christian letter, the Epistle to Diognetus, you also see something of this understanding, in a passage that is very heavily informed by 1 Peter chapter 2.

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind, either in locality, or in speech, or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life.

Nor again do they possess any invention discovered by any intelligence, or study of ingenious men, nor are they masters of any human dogma, as some are. But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians, as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs and dress and food, and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation.

They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners. They bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign.

[ 4 : 55 ] They marry like all other men, and they beget children, but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh.

Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men, and they are persecuted by all.

They are ignored, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and yet they are endowed with life. They are in beggary, and yet they make many rich. They are in want of all things, and yet they are bound in all things.

They are dishonoured, and yet they are glorified in their dishonour. They are evil spoken of, and yet they are vindicated. They are reviled, and they bless. They are insulted, and they respect.

Doing good, they are punished as evildoers. Being punished, they rejoice, as if they were thereby quickened by life. War is waged against them as aliens by the Jews, and persecution is carried on against them by the Greeks, and yet those that hate them cannot tell the reason of their hostility.

[ 6 : 00 ] They are charged to abstain from passions of the flesh, because these things wage war against the soul. They are living in hostile territory, and the flesh that is being referred to here is more like Adamic humanity in its fallen and weak condition.

Our souls, by contrast, are our own selves, which are compromised and threatened and challenged by the passions of the flesh. We are in constant warfare, and Christians will face constant accusations, false accusations.

Christians should live lives of exemplary godliness, lives beyond slander. The hope is that such conduct will lead Gentiles to glorify God on the day of visitation. Gentiles is an interesting word to use here.

It is applied to those outside of the church. The church is contrasted with the nations in the way that Israel formerly was. Israel set against the Gentiles is now the church set against the Gentiles.

In the verses that follow, Peter will particularize this message to people in particular relationships and callings. The beginning of verse 13, be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, could be read as a heading for what follows.

[ 7 : 09 ] As in Ephesians chapter 5 verse 21, being subject or submitting ourselves to others is fundamental to Christian behavior in the world in every single context.

Peter's approach is very similar to Paul's. We must place others before ourselves and behave with meekness towards all. Ultimately, this is for the Lord's sake and an obedience to him.

This is applied, first of all, to the emperor, which is presumably Nero at this time, and to governors and other rulers. These have been given the task of punishing evil and praising those who do good.

This is similar to what Paul says in Romans chapter 13 verses 1 to 4. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority?

[ 8 : 08 ] Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Rulers in both Paul's teaching and in Peter's are spoken of as servants of Christ, and they must be treated in such a manner. They may be unfaithful servants of Christ, but they are servants nonetheless.

This both underwrites their authority and also demystifies their authority. The ruler or the king or the emperor is not ultimately overall. He is not divine. He is a servant of God.

That's all he is. He is not someone who can place himself over God. The ruler has been given the task of punishing those who do evil and praising those who do good. This is fundamentally a task of judgment, a task of establishing a moral order within the land.

Christians must live, meekly, as exemplary citizens, silencing any slanderers. As people in a democratic society, our relationship with government is of course different in some respects from that which would have existed in Peter's day, but the fundamental note of subjection must be retained.

[ 9 : 19 ] In part, this approach to subjection is informed by the fact that we are citizens of another country. The lands that we currently inhabit are not our final home, and as a result, we should not be overly preoccupied with our political rights or the honour of our nations, but should be far more concerned with the place where our citizenship is from and where our treasure is, in heaven with Christ.

Part of what Christian freedom entails is the fact that the governors and rulers and other people over us in this age are not the final horizon. We can look beyond them to God to whom our submission ultimately is given.

Freedom then must be rightly understood. It must not be a cover-up for evil or rebellion. We have a general duty of honour to others. Christian faith is a faith that accords dignity to all.

The radical nature of this, in societies where people are often denied all dignity, or others are granted dignity at the expense of their neighbours, should really not be missed.

While we can often focus upon the unequal distribution of wealth, the deeper inequity can often be the distribution of dignity. Many people in our societies feel despised by their neighbours.

[ 10 : 30 ] Many feel ignored, unseen or denigrated. Much life is lived as a vaunting of ourselves over others, an attempt to gain the upper hand, to gain dignity at other people's expense.

The two words, honour everyone, could not be more radical in such a context. In addition to this more general duty of honour, there is a particular duty of love to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This love is one that must engage both the actions and the affections. It should also be the distinguishing mark of the people of God. See how they love one another. The supreme duty of fear of God comes above everything and before everything else.

And this is the third charge that he gives in this verse. The emperor is the final one. He must be honoured. The way that we speak of him, the way that we live under his rule. All of these things must be characterised by respect of the office and of the one who is within it.

Yet the honouring of the emperor is not the same thing as the fear of God. The fear of God comes first. The emperor is not God and cannot take his place. Peter does not address masters but speaks to servants and particularly servants in households.

[ 11 : 40 ] The servant must submit to his master. Peter doesn't deal with the injustice of the institution of slavery but rather speaks of the way that someone in the position of a servant must act.

The institution isn't simply invalidated. However, it is noteworthy that Peter chiefly deals with it within a frame of injustice. He focuses not upon masters in general but upon cruel and unjust masters in particular.

The submission of the servant is not contingent upon the goodness of their masters. This is biblical teaching more generally. When we think about submission, many people want to have escape clauses whether it's to government or wives to husbands or servants to masters.

Many people are most concerned that there should be exception clauses and these will be foregrounded over the duty of submission that really should take first place. It is important to recognise that such statements are not justification of the institution of slavery more generally nor are they supposed to be turned around as if they granted the master a divine claim over the servant.

The servant's subjection is on account of Christ not on account of his master. The servant is called to identify with the way of Christ himself who suffered injustice righteously and not on account of any sin on his part.

[ 12 : 57 ] There is no honour in suffering for sinful behaviour. Indeed, suffering for righteousness sake is suffering to which all Christians have been called. It is a matter of walking in the footsteps of Christ and being joined with him in his suffering.

He has given us the example and we must follow after him. Peter speaks of the sufferings of Christ in a way that presents them as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah weaving allusions to Isaiah chapter 53 in with descriptions of Christ's behaviour in his trials and on the cross.

Verses 3-5 and verse 7 of Isaiah chapter 53 read He was oppressed and he was afflicted yet he opened not his mouth like a lamb that has led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent so he opened not his mouth.

Peter concludes the chapter by returning to verse 6 of Isaiah chapter 53 All we like sheep have gone astray we have turned every one to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all and he connects this to the redemption that they have received.

You have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. Moving into chapter 3 he calls wives to be subject to their own husbands. Likewise not just like the slaves should be subject to his master but also like men have to be subject to rulers and governments submission isn't something exclusive to wives rather it is the general pattern of Christian behaviour that must be refracted into the particularities of their specific vocation.

[ 14 : 56 ] There is reason for concern when this is forgotten. When the submission of wives becomes something just by itself rather than the manner of Christian behaviour in which we all put others before ourselves and we submit to those over us the biblical teaching can be twisted into one of male dominance rather than one of the way of Christ who took on the form of the servant.

Once again the subjection here is ultimately for the Lord's sake. The woman's true master is Christ not her husband just as we must submit to the ruling authorities less as the great lords over us but more as the servants of Christ so the wife must submit to her husband as a fellow servant of Christ with a particular calling relative to her.

As the true master is Christ not the husband the husband is not given a right of mastery over his wife. The more general command of meek faithfulness and exemplary behaviour is now applied to the wife.

Early churches were predominantly female in their membership and slaves were very highly represented too. Many women would have had pagan husbands and this would be a situation that the early church would often have to address.

We should also be clear that marriage for many would have been very cruel. The point of Peter's teaching here is not that mistreated slaves and abused wives should have no recourse rather he is presenting them with a pattern for Christian conduct in a society where there often was no such recourse.

[ 16 : 21 ] Their conduct must be respectful and pure it must be driven by the fear of God. And the danger for women would be to overvalue outward adornment broadcasting wealth and status and physical appearance.

The true adornment however is that of Christian graces graces that are unassuming meek and modest. This is not going to win human attention so much but God sees it.

It's not a pursuit of human praise and honour and advancement over others. Dress, adornment and cosmetics can so often be driven by a preoccupation with advancement or preference over others and must, like everything else, be subject to the Christian disciplines of modesty, meekness and concern for others over ourselves.

Paul makes similar points in 1 Timothy chapter 2 verses 9 to 10. Women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel with modesty and self-control not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire but with what is proper for women who profess godliness with good works.

Neither of these passages are condemning attractive dress or appearance but they do challenge attitudes that typically drive people's pursuit of these things something that Peter, like Paul, presents as a temptation for women especially.

[ 17 : 38 ] For those women who might be worried that they will not be seen if they follow Peter's instruction, Peter wants them to be aware of their immense value in the sight of God. God sees and truly values what others might not have the eyes to see or to value.

This is the pattern of behaviour of the holy women of old, the great heroines of the faith. They didn't trumpet their presence but God saw the remarkable character of their quiet and unassuming graces and he wants his people to do the same.

These heroines of the faith, their submission to their husbands is especially singled out as the context where their graces are most seen and where they flourished. Their submission to their husbands was driven by hope in God.

It takes a lot not to seek to push oneself forward or to assume charge but the people of God, men and women, are those who are prepared to live in situations of dependence, of lack of power and control and to put the interests of others before themselves.

This is what it meant for Abraham to dwell as a stranger in the promised land, for Moses to lead the Israelites out into the wilderness or for David not to strike out at Saul. Such a way of living demands a fierce and determined dependence upon and hope in God.

[ 18 : 54 ] Sarah, the mother of the faithful, is the great example here. Sarah spoke of Abraham with great respect and honoured him and she courageously entered situations that were dangerous on his account following his lead as God had called him.

Sarah wasn't a weak and spinelessly compliant woman. It took immense courage for her to follow Abraham and his calling, especially as she generally didn't enjoy the same agency within it as he did.

She is defined by a determination to do good and by fearlessness and her daughters must be also. Their situations might be complicated by unfaithful husbands.

They might need to be submissive to pagan husbands even while courageously resisting their intimidation and their attempts to prevent them from following Christ. Submission, as Peter presents it, is not a fearful capitulation to intimidation or passive compliance with lordship.

Quite the opposite. It is courageous and active. In verse 7 he moves on to husbands. Once again we see the word likewise introducing the command to husbands. In verses 13 and 17 we see a connection between being subject and honouring.

[ 20 : 04 ] These things look different from relationship to relationship. Husbands and wives are not in a symmetrical relationship at all but the duty of honouring others and placing them before ourselves is refracted within each of these contexts and relationships.

Husbands are called to live with their wives in an understanding way. They are called to live with them to share the realities of life together. They are called to live with understanding.

This might be read as a reference to the knowledge of Christ and his truth but I think it's more likely a reference to sympathetic understanding and attention to their wives. They are to be loving and considerate.

This requires developing the arts of listening and noticing, of observing those things that will enable their wives to flourish. And they must show honour to the woman as the weaker vessel.

Women are weaker than men in various ways, most immediately in physical strength, but also in certain other respects such as power in wider society and vulnerability to various forms of mistreatment.

[ 21 : 04 ] The husband's response to this ought not to be a cruel dominance over her, but a greater regard for and honouring of her. That the response to relative weakness should be greater honour was exceedingly counter-cultural in Peter's day and remains so in many ways in our own.

The husband must show respect for his wife and ensure that others do too. He must protect her from harm and put her interests ahead of his own in the exercise of his strength. The wife is a joint heir with her husband of the grace of eternal life.

They are both equal in dignity, they are servants of Christ together and they must treat each other accordingly. Husbands must show great concern for the health of their marriages and their relationship with their wives.

If they do not, their spiritual life might be greatly harmed. Our relationship with God is not hermetically sealed from our relationship with our neighbour and our closest neighbour is our spouse.

If we are not at peace and in right relationship with our neighbour and most particularly with our spouse, we may find that our prayers are not being answered. A question to consider.

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