**First Peter No. 16, “Husbands and Wives”**

**1 Peter 16** **3:1-7**

**February 11, 2018**

**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Remember where we are now. We are in the middle of Peter’s exposition of the Christian life, a life, as he explained in his introduction, that is to be the life of sojourners and exiles in this world, a life that bears witness to others of the glory of God, and a life that will inevitably be a challenge, not least because it requires us to put to death strong desires that still rest in our hearts. He began with our life as citizens, then moved on to our life as workers, employees if you will, all of us facing difficulties of one kind or another in this dimension of life. He spoke to the slaves, those whose working life was the most difficult, but in so doing, laid down principles that apply to us all. Now he moves on to Christians who are or are to be husbands and wives. The principles of Christian godliness apply to each dimension of life in specific ways.

**Text Comments**

v.1 The adverb translated “in the same way” harks back to the statement introducing this section in v. 13 of chapter 2: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution…” (Only remember, we said a more likely translation was “submit yourselves to every human being,” a general statement that Peter is now applying to specific cases.) He doesn’t mean every single human being. He’s not telling parents to submit themselves to their children, for example, but he is using that general statement as a title for a section of his exposition in which various relationships of submission are going to be discussed. Peter has so far given two examples of how Christians may do this: all believers should be subject to the state; Christian slaves should be subject to their masters; and, now, Christian wives to their husbands. This is, of course, also what Paul says in Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians 3:18. Peter is first going to address specifically the case of wives whose husbands were still pagan, a not unusual situation in early Christianity. But then he will proceed to general exhortations that apply to all Christian wives.

v.3 Clearly there were some well-to-do women in these churches. The Bible, of course, is not against the cultivation of feminine appearance; it speaks of that positively in many places. I heard a Christian college professor some time back say that he had come to realize that commenting on a woman’s appearance was discriminatory, because, of course, some women are more attractive than others. On politically correct secular campuses they call this “lookism,” the prejudice against less attractive women and in favor of more attractive. The problem for us is not only that the world does this and will always do this – that is, notice and comment on the appearance of very attractive women – the Bible does it as well! Divine gifts are given to all, but the same gifts are not. Like all of God’s gifts beauty is to be enjoyed and cultivated. But for a Christian woman, Peter is saying, it must not be the basis of one’s confidence or hope for happiness in life. Physical appearance must not be used to draw attention to oneself in a selfish or sinful way. It must not become a matter of pride or self-assertion over against others: in this case rich women parading their fancy clothes and expensive jewelry before poorer women who must dress more simply. Outward appearance, like so much else in life, must be cultivated in moderation as is appropriate for a woman who clearly believes that the beauty of one’s character, the holiness of one’s life is much more important than physical appearance. Obviously, we must wear clothes. And obviously there is no particular virtue in wearing rags. The problem comes when one “wears clothes” for reasons that do not adorn or actually contradict one’s Christian faith or love of God. *Christians know what pleases God the most!*

v.5 As always, there is never any perceived difference between the spiritual world of OT saints and that of the NT. The godly today are simply told to imitate the godly of that ancient epoch.

v.6 The reference is to Genesis 18:12, where Sarah refers to Abraham as “her master.” It is important, perhaps especially for women who find themselves struggling to reconcile the Bible’s teaching about women in marriage, society, and church with what our culture teaches them to aspire to, to recognize how revolutionary Peter’s teaching here was. He addresses women directly, without a view to the opinions of their husbands, urges them to live their lives on the basis of the highest conceivable principles, and to remain faithful to those principles even though it may bring them into some conflict with their husbands. In that world, at that time, women were expected to follow the religious leadership of their husbands; they were, in most respects, absolutely subject to their husbands and vulnerable to their husband’s whims if married to cruel or thoughtless men. In many respects, at least for many women, they were their husband’s property.But Peter addresses them as independent moral agents with their own lives to live. The most surprising thing here to a first century reader of the Bible would perhaps be that women and wives were addressed separately in the first place.

v.7 The husband also has a special calling in that area of duty defined in 2:13, to show understanding to their wives and to treat them with a special consideration. This is a frontal, revolutionary attack on the trivialization or actual contempt of women that was commonplace in the ancient world and is commonplace in many parts of the world still today.

Now, what about the phrase “weaker vessel?” Only in a politically correct world such as ours does it become problematic to discuss and to admit what everyone knows, facts around which human society has been organized from the beginning of history. Women are more vulnerable in some – hardly all – but in some very significant ways in relation to men. They are more physically vulnerable because they are not as strong; and they are emotionally vulnerable because they are more dependent upon social interaction, upon their relationships, and so on. My goodness, the irony is that nowadays we even know some of the highly technical biological and bio-chemical sources of some of these differences but we are still forbidden to admit that they exist!

We have battered women shelters but not shelters for battered men. The business world is beset with troubles caused by the sexual harassment of women in the workplace, but the sexual harassment of men is not a social problem. The MeToo movement of late has unwittingly reminded us that in this age of the so-called empowerment of women, women find themselves repeatedly subject to the unwanted advances of men, and in many cases, feel they can do nothing to resist those advances. There is no MeToo movement of men for the obvious reason that the man is not the weaker vessel in this respect.

Remember “weaker” is being used in a context. A Ming vase is weaker than a five-dollar hammer; a Rembrandt canvas is weaker than a razor blade; and Mother Theresa is weaker than a heavyweight boxer! Peter is not talking about the comparative worth of men and women, he is speaking of the reason why men have a special responsibility, laid upon them by their Creator, to show a particular regard for women and for their wives in particular. It was not so long ago, even in secular Western societies that a man was measured in significant part according to the way in which he protected and provided for the women in his life. Only a feminist ideologue surveying the wreckage of American society can really believe that the abandonment of this viewpoint has improved the lot of women and children, or the lot of men for that matter.

Now we have already discussed, several times over, the basic thrust of these three illustrations that Peter employs to make his main point. That point, with which he began in 2:11-12 concerned the great difference that ought to distinguish the life of Christians in this world. In each case, Peter urges us to live not as those seeking this world’s gratification for themselves. Christians have a unique set of principles and purposes governing their lives. These are sufficient to justify a Christian slave treating even the most boorish master with respect, Christian citizens offering their civic duty to even the most unjust of governments, and, now, sufficient to justify a Christian wife honoring even the most boorish, thoughtless, and selfish unbelieving husband.

Now, it would certainly be appropriate, all the more in our historical moment, to concentrate our attention on the Bible’s and historic Christianity’s doctrine of sexual differentiation between men and women, the callings appropriate to each sex; that male and female are divinely created orders of being, however much as divine image-bearers and as equally the objects of Christ’s redeeming work and the Holy Spirit's indwelling they are accordingly in most respects the same and are addressed in the Bible in most respects irrespective of their sex. When the Bible speaks of the Christian life, it speaks to men and women *generally* most of time without regard to the difference between them. However obvious this teaching in the Bible, however easy it is to observe it in the experience of human life, our culture is in open revolt against it and now much of so-called evangelical Christianity in America is as well. Evangelicals of this modern mind, of course, attempt to demonstrate that the Bible has been misunderstood all this time and that, in fact, on this point modern feminism has come closer to the Bible’s teaching than did the historic Christian tradition. You need to know, however, that the exegetical theological warfare that has been waged on this point over the past generation was, in fact, a series of discrete battles – over the meaning of Greek words, over the interpretation of specific passages, over the historical context of certain passages of the Bible, and so on – each of which battle has been won and won decisively by the side defending the church’s historic understanding of the Bible’s teaching. However impossibly archaic, unfair, even Neanderthal the Bible’s teaching is now widely thought to be, it is very clearly what the Bible actually teaches.

The fact that the battles were all lost but the war is still being won by the evangelical feminists is some indication that there was no real interest in submitting to the Bible’s teaching. Their concern was to quiet their consciences and the consciences of those they taught by demonstrating that they had paid attention to the Bible, that they didn’t change the historic viewpoint of the church until they had come to understand what the Bible actually said. They would take great offense at my saying this, but the proof is in the pudding. They weren’t really interested in what the Bible taught. They already knew what they were willing to believe as modern folk. They made what case they could and hurried on. No one nowadays in those circles is much interested any longer in talking about what the Bible actually teaches in the important passages.

One of many demonstrations of the fact that this is what has happened is that the biblical work done by the so-called evangelical feminists to prove that feminism is in fact the teaching of the NT is respected by themselves alone. Liberal biblical scholarship doesn’t buy it. Liberals can often be very perceptive interpreters of Holy Scripture precisely because they don’t regard themselves as under any obligation to believe and obey what the Bible says. They can take a dispassionate view of the text because they don’t have anything at stake in it. If Paul taught the headship of the man and the subordination of the woman in marriage and church, so be it. It doesn’t mean that they have to believe or practice such things, for as modern people who have little regard for the Bible as the Word of God they feel no obligation to believe its teaching or obey its commands. Liberal scholarship knows very well that what the Christian church has always believed about the nature of gender and the relationship between men and women is what is actually taught in the Bible. They chalk it up to the Bible being a product of its time. In their view, too bad for the Bible. And that scholarship, for that reason, has been little impressed with certain evangelical efforts to prove that in fact the Bible’s message is feminist in eradicating significant distinctions between men and women. What I have come to think is the best commentary on 1 Peter in my possession, the one I have found more useful than any other, is written by such a scholar. He does not hesitate to affirm that Peter taught that same view of gender and calling that can be found in the rest of the Bible and which is that view that so offends modern sensibilities. It isn’t his view, but he knows it was Peter’s.

But, enough of that. Peter doesn’t argue the distinction between men and women in calling and role here, he assumes it; he presupposes it as a fact both of revelation and life. He wants to say, instead, something directly relevant to the lives of Christian wives and husbands. Just as he told Christian slaves what, in their behavior, would be a fine thing in God’s sight; here he tells Christian wives what, in their behavior, would be “very precious” in God’s sight.

There is something of great practical importance in the fact that Peter assumes that men and women are different in certain ways and that those differences invariably shape their lives and their relationship in marriage. Paul does the same thing. He doesn’t argue that men and women are different; he knows that they are and presupposes the difference. And, in the same way, you don’t have to spend your time wringing your hands over just how men and women are different, just what those differences must mean, and how you are supposed to reflect them in your life. Are you aware of the fact that a generation ago and then for generations stretching backward through the ages, Christian men and women hardly ever asked the questions that Christians, especially young Christians are agonizing over today. Just what does it mean that a wife is to submit to her husband? How can I submit and retain my own dignity and individuality? How can I submit to a man who isn’t as smart as I am? And on and on.

They didn’t ask those questions by and large. I raise this issue in what is called pre-marital counseling these days because I have to assure young couples that they don’t need to worry about this. But years ago few ministers would have even thought to mention it. Do you know why? Because everyone assumed **–** no, that’s not it, rather everyone *knew* ***–*** that women were different than men and vice versa and that the woman was the weaker vessel. And because they did, they realized that neither Peter nor Paul were haranguing them to accept the fact that this was so. That wasn’t the point of either apostle. The point was that as men and as women in marriage they were called to submit their sex to the demands of God’s holiness and their Christian faith. Peter isn’t telling the wife here that she needs to know that she’s the weaker vessel, still less that for that reason she’s a second-class citizen in her own home and marriage, as feminism would have it. And Peter isn’t telling the husband that he needs to make sure his wife knows that she’s the weaker vessel. What Peter is telling both of them is that what matters is that the wife be a *Christian* wife and the husband be a *Christian husband.* The masculinity and the femininity will take care of themselves because that is what *you are*. But you’ve got to apply yourself to practice your faith, both women and men have to do that! They will do it in a different way, because one is a woman and one is a man. If I were to plan to write a book and were to tell some publisher that I wanted to title the book, “The Sexual Life of a Nun,” the publisher would suppose I was going to tell salacious tales about what happened in monasteries years ago, but actually a nun is a woman and everything she does in obedience to God and in the desire to serve him she does as a woman. She couldn’t possibly do it any other way because that is who she is. And similarly, the man is who he is.What we need is wives who are living for Christ in their marriages and men who are doing the same. If we have that, the best of both sexes will be invested in the marriage to the blessing and benefit of the husband and wife together, their children, and the world.Stop worrying about how men and women are different. Just concentrate on sanctifying yourself, as a man or as a woman.

So just as Peter does not tell wives here to grin and bear the fact that they must submit to their husbands, that they are nothing but a weaker vessel and should learn to accept the fact, and just as he doesn’t tell the husbands that they’re the bosses in their homes and should never let their wives forget that fact, in the same way he doesn’t tell the women to seek empowerment or liberation from patriarchal stereotypes or tell the men that the fact that they are men and not women is of no significance whatsoever. Instead he says to both of them that since they live their lives before God, what matters is that they live as husbands and wives in that way that is pleasing to God, in that way that is humble and lovingand self-sacrificing. The difference between them as men and women will take care of itself. What matters is that each devotes his or her sex to the marriage in a genuinely Christ-like way.

Even women who are married to unbelieving men should be subject to their husbands because that kind of humility, that kind of sacrifice for love’s sake is something very precious in God’s sight. And take note, what Peter says to women married to unsaved men is not much different from what Paul says to women married to Christian men! And also take note of the fact that if a man treats his wife as Peter instructs him to do here in v. 7, that is honors her as he should, treats her as a Christian should as equally a child of God, equally precious in God’s sight; if a man loves his wife as Christ loved the church – which was Paul’s way of saying what Peter said here in v. 7 – no woman is going to be thinking about how confining her marriage is or how her rights have been trampled on!

True enough there are a lot of bad marriages and, alas, too many bad marriages in the Christian church. But there is not a single bad marriage, not one, in which the wife and the husband behave toward one another as Peter tells husbands and wives to behave in these verses. Show me the wife who resents her husband because he loves her sacrificially, because he honors her, because he treats her as he knows his heavenly Father expects one of his daughters to be treated by one of his sons. And show me the husband who resents his wife because she respects him and because her conduct, offered first to God himself, is so admirable, so self-sacrificial, and so humble.

Let’s be clear about this. The Bible wants Christian women, and Christian wives, to live as strangers and aliens in this world, and to view their life and their conduct *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, from the vantage point or perspective of eternity. A great deal of what the Bible demands of us makes no sense if there is no judgment day, if there is no heaven, if there is no God who will someday delight to receive and reward those who did what pleased him. If this world and this life is all there is, and the rewards one may obtain here are all the rewards that a man or woman will ever enjoy, then it makes sense for women to grab all the power they can while they can and it makes sense to judge everything by the effect it has on someone’s satisfaction here and now. Of course, in that case, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. The man will do the same, which will be no blessing for his wife!

True enough, a woman may seem to be throwing her life and happiness away who is submissive to a pagan and unworthy husband and who dedicates herself to the cultivation of a quiet and gentle spirit if, in fact, these things are not precious to God and if God will never reward her for what she did. But that is precisely what Christians believe and believe on the authority of the Word of God. No, that is what Christians *know*! Everything in this world and in this life must be evaluated in terms of its meaning and its significance for the world to come. Good looks, conduct in one's marriage, happiness in marriage, and a thousand other things, all mean one thing when viewed in terms of this world and this life alone, and mean something very different when viewed from the vantage point of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the Day of Judgement, the acceptance and approval or rejection and disapproval of the living God, and so from the vantage point of heaven and hell.

The way that Christian ethics cut across the common opinion of human beings in this world is almost entirely due to the fact that Christianity has this forward look to it, it views things in terms of the future judgment, in terms of another world. Feminism, even so-called evangelical feminism, is a movement that has gained strength precisely because the world to come no longer weighs on the minds of many Christians, they no longer think of their lives here in terms of their connection to another world, or, in Peter’s language, they no longer think of themselves as strangers and aliens in the world. Feminism is a movement for those whose home is here. It is a natural development in a secularized world that has lost sight almost completely of the world to come and of the will of God to be revealed in the Last Judgment.

However, it is also true, both in the Bible and in the experience of life, that those who live their lives to please God as a rule even in this world enjoy their lives more, have healthier and happier relationships, and do more good to others. You don’t have to choose between true Christian obedience and the fulfillment of life. The one leads to the other. And one has only to look around in this modern world of ours to see how poorly the new views of man and woman are working out in actual lives. Taking the Last Judgment seriously improves life, sweetens it, invests it in meaning; it never diminishes it. In this particular case, as Peter says, Christian women who respond to their unbelieving, even boorish husbands with a gentle and quiet spirit are far more likely to win them over and so far more likely to gain a happy union in marriage for themselves, than are those women who insist on their rights at every turn. Believe me, there has never been in this world, a complaining and whining and criticizing wife who won over her husband to love and good deeds. Christian ethics work in the real world. They are, after all, the way human life was meant to be lived. God has suited his laws to our natures as he made them.

But a concern for the next world is always also the Bible’s viewpoint in regard to this and every subject. In Proverbs 31 we read, “Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but the woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” Why? Because physical beauty does not last; physical attractiveness must go the way of all flesh. But the fear of the Lord lasts forever; it takes a woman or a man to the world of endless joy, because it takes them to God.

Simone Weil, the French Jewess philosopher, who became a Christian in part through the poems of George Herbert struggled, as many women do, with maintaining a positive view of herself. She was very plain in appearance and knew she was plain. She struggled all her life at this point. In a kind of vengeance against her appearance she went far in the other direction: refusing to make any effort to cultivate her appearance – perhaps because she was afraid of failure; perhaps because she was resigned not to seek fulfillment where she knew she could not find it; perhaps, to some extent, liberated by her plainness to forsake appearance altogether. In any case, her typical costume was a caricature of the woman with no taste and no interest in her appearance: an oversize brown beret, a shapeless cape, and large floppy shoes. In her life she made a principle of avoiding charm. Perhaps for that reason, she latched on to Peter’s point here with particular eagerness and with unusual sympathy.

“A beautiful woman,” she wrote, “looking at her image in the mirror may very well believe the image is herself. An ugly woman knows it is not.” [*Waiting for God*, 16]

Is that not at least part of Peter’s point. Some things are temporary, much less important in the full scheme of things, and must, therefore, have a smaller place in our thinking. The true meaning of a human being is found in the things that last forever, the things that have to do with our faith, our love of Christ, our obtaining an inheritance in the world to come, our giving glory to our God and Savior; these must have clearly, unmistakably the first place.

We Christians should be ready to admit that the world will not buy that argument, will not believe us, and will not adjust its behavior, until and unless it comes to believe that God will judge all men and that the great significance of a man or woman’s behavior in this world is precisely the effect it has on a person’s destiny in the world and life to come. Who says, after all, that outward beauty is not nearly as important as the beauty of the inner self? Well, people may think that they should say that, but a great many more people admired Mother Teresa than imitated her. Who says that it is a greater thing to remain in a marriage with a man who has no sympathy for your deepest beliefs and longings in the hope – perhaps the vain hope – that by your example you may help to win him to faith and eternal life and even find greater happiness for yourself in living in a way that is very precious to God? And who says that in a woman a gentle and quiet spirit is more beautiful than an assertive commanding spirit?

Well, God says these things! Well, what difference does it make if God has such opinions? Well, as Peter will say in chapter 4, God will someday reveal to the whole world the glory of his Son, and will bring all men into judgment, to reward those who have done his will and condemn those who have not. But remember, God is love, and he never asks anyone to do something that isn’t best for that person. Never! The world never advises people to live in their marriages in a way that makes more powerful their prayers. But the Bible does. And the simple fact is that living so as to make your prayers more powerful will end up being the happiest way to live. Christian women, do you not wish to join that great company of women before you who did what Peter here told them to do and profited both themselves and others.

Here is Augustine, in his *Confessions*, speaking of his mother, Monica, and her influence on his father Patricius.

“She served her husband as her master, and did all she could to win him for You, speaking to him of You by her conduct, by which you made her beautiful...Finally, when her husband was at the end of his earthly span, she gained him for You.” [IX, 19-22]

The world thinks, what a wasteto have spent all of that lifetime with a boorish husband, what an injustice! But then the world does not understand or appreciate that the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents, but that no one in heaven is ever said to have rejoiced over one woman who was empowered to make money or to accumulate prestige in the business world.

Whose daughter do you wish to be, Christian sisters? Simone de Beauvoir? Gloria Steinem? Kate Millet? Or Sarah? Or Monica? Or Mary? Whose entire life was summed up in the words she spoke to Gabriel: “I am the Lord's servant...” And men, who is your model. The modern American user of women or the Lord himself who told his heavenly Father, all of those you gave to me, I have loved them to the end.