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Winsome Wives and Godly Husbands in a Marriage-unfriendly World

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to 1 Peter 3:1-7, as we resume our series from this letter from “the Apostle of Hope” to the followers of Christ scattered throughout Asia Minor, living as strangers and aliens in a hostile environment. Two Sundays ago we looked at Chapter 2:11-25, which describes “winsome living in a godless world.” In that text we noted the necessity of godly living as a strategy for winning to Christ those who might presently be hostile opponents and even persecutors of the faithful. Our approach is to follow the example of Christ, the supreme servant, as we submit ourselves to the authorities over us, such as the government and our employers, following the same principles that Peter gives to slaves obeying their masters.

Note the connection of thought in our text for today, as Peter says that wives are to relate to their authorities “in the same way.” In this passage we note what Peter says to Christian wives and husbands living in a marriage-unfriendly world.

Follow as I read **1 Peter 3:1-7**.

Can there be any doubt that we live in a marriage-unfriendly culture? This is true, not only here in Belgium, but also in my home country, the USA. Even with the large number of at least professing Christians and church-goers, the situation in the US regarding the health of marriages is not much better, if any. And more specifically, most research shows that the marriages of evangelical, conservative, Bible-believing Christians are not any more successful, with their divorce rate being as high as that of pagan unbelievers. In recent days, two well-known Baptist pastors in the US asked their churches to grant them a leave of absence in order to focus on their marriage relationships, which they feared had been damaged by their neglect due to stressful ministries. Our own neglect, as well as the attacks from the Enemy, place marriages in harm's way.

In this Western culture of so-called Christendom, the institution of marriage is under threat of near extinction. Even young professing believers are living together outside the bond and blessing of a Christian marriage. It's not unusual for a young couple to approach me for pre-marriage counseling and then admit to me, often without apology, that they are cohabiting and/or are engaging in sexual intimacy. Many couples, even as professing followers of Christ, have decided to be partners without the legal obligation and entanglement of a marriage certificate. That way, if the relationship is unsuccessful, they can simply go their separate ways without going through a messy divorce, which perhaps their parents experienced.

And as in the 1st Century environment of the pagan Roman Empire, there are forces that militate against a successful, lasting and God-honoring marriage. As one has said, this passage in 1 Peter is not to be read as a "marriage manual" (Jobes, 209). For a more complete theological description of the marriage relationship, we need to consider other Scriptures, such as Ephesians 5:22-33. Our text for today is rather to be seen as Peter's message to Christian wives and husbands who face the threat of an unbelieving spouse or at least a culture that has no regard for a lasting, faithful marriage.

Marriage as instituted by God in Scripture as one of the foundational relationships and institutions for society in general and the Kingdom of God in particular was under threat in the 1st Century culture of the Greco-Roman world. Likewise, Christian marriage is under threat in our culture. As we listen to prayer requests in this church, we realize that marriages, even within the IBC Brussels family, are threatened, troubled and in some cases, falling apart. Some of the forces militating against marriages come from the outside in the form of temptations to infidelity and the general disregard for marriage. But the root cause of the failure of Christian marriage is within the heart and mind of the husband and wife and their unwillingness to obey God's word and depend on the power and fruit of the Holy Spirit.

In our text we have good news and a message, not just for married couples, but also for those contemplating marriage or for those unmarried partners who ought to seek God's blessings through the covenant and commitment of

marriage. There's a message here also for young people, who some day may face the marriage choice, and for single adults, who also have an important role to play in encouraging strong, God-honoring marriages. Peter tells us how marriages are to succeed in a marriage-unfriendly culture.

Let's note, first of all, that marriages will succeed with...

Winsome wives

Peter makes the connection with Christian wives' following the same principle set forth in 2:13ff, about submitting to authorities, just as Christ Jesus submitted himself as our supreme slave/servant. And so he says that wives are to be...

Appropriately submissive

In this fallen world, we are called to follow Jesus in a cruciform life, taking the pattern of the life of Jesus (2:21) in self-denial, sacrifice and surrender to even our enemies. As we noted from the previous passage, the way we are called to win the world to faith in Christ is through power under, the way of serving, rather than power over, which is the way the world attempts to control others (Boyd, 17ff). We are not called to passive servitude, but to active surrender to others by submitting to the authorities that God has placed over our lives. We've noted that we submit to and honor, as much as possible, the authority of government, which God has placed over us for the good of society and for our good as well (2:13-17). Slaves, a term which we can apply to employees, are to submit to their masters, i.e. our employers (2:18-21). In this fallen and sometimes hostile world, we are called to submit to the authority of those over us and follow the pattern of Jesus by serving them and showing them the love of Christ. This is the pattern Christ gave us (21, "example" in the NIV).

These verses in our text call for Christian wives to accept the authority of their husbands in an appropriate way. Peter acknowledges that some of the believing wives in the churches were married to pagan husbands. In all likelihood, these women had been evangelized after their marriages when they were also pagan unbelievers. Now they were experiencing the sword of belief that Jesus said would divide households (Matthew 10:34). Following the same principle in 2:11-12, Peter says that godly wives are called into the strategy of winning their pagan husbands through the influence of their godly behavior.

Not many secular historians give Christianity the credit it is due for influencing society, and many today look upon the Christian faith as oppressive to women because of some leadership roles that biblical interpretation has traditionally ascribed singularly to men. But even in the Old Testament the worth of godly women and even their often heroic leadership is featured in the wisdom and historical books. And certainly in the Gospels we see how Jesus called women to also follow him as his disciples and some of these followers were key witnesses of his crucifixion and resurrection. In the earliest church, some women were preachers, called prophetesses (Acts 21:9), and there seems to be an increasing recognition of the value and giftedness of women serving in

the church (Romans 16:1f). And Paul places women and men together on the same level of spiritual worth and equality (Galatians 3:28). (For a thought-provoking study that demonstrates the elevating role of women in the church see Webb, below)

Contrast this with the way women were treated in the Greco-Roman world as mere property of their husbands, of little more value than slaves in the household. Women were often ill-treated and physically abused. Peter would not expect women who were following Christ to be treated in this way (Jobes, 206). But what Peter is admonishing is that wives are to submit to their husbands in ways that do not violate their prior obedience to Christ and that acknowledge that their husband's leadership is given to them for their wellbeing.

For Christian wives to follow Christ while married to a pagan was very revolutionary in that culture, and Peter is anxious to say to them to not give occasion for these unbelieving husbands to perceive that followers of Christ are subversive to the wellbeing of culture, which many opponents of the Christian movement wanted people to believe. Pagans normally demanded that their wives believe in their pagan gods and also that their realm of friendship be confined to their own friends. It was quietly revolutionary for these Christian wives to make their own friends among believers in the church fellowship.

It was also likely that pagan husbands would threaten their Christian wives, and here Peter says they must not give way to fear, which means to live courageously and not be intimidated by threats or uncertain circumstances. These women followers of Jesus, just as was Sarah (5-6), lived in uncertain, dangerous times and circumstances, but they could quietly place their faith in God. Just as did the apostles in the earliest church, in situations that call for the choice of loyalty to Christ or submission to any other authority, believing spouses must obey God rather than persons (Acts 5:29).

If this was true for wives married to pagans, how much more should believing wives submit to the God-given authority and loving leadership assigned to their Christian husbands, who had placed themselves under the authority of Christ! As Peter in our text gives the apologetic view of Christians spouses relating to unbelieving spouses, Paul gives us the theological basis for the marriage relationship in Ephesians 5:21-33 (Jobes, 210).

Wives who are disciples of Christ are to submit to their husbands, not primarily to please them, but to please and to obey the Lord, who is our supreme authority and who enables us to live in a spirit of quiet surrender, trusting that we are more than conquerors through Christ Jesus. A Christian wife's submission to her Christian husband should be based on a joyful and fulfilling partnership, whereby she and her husband work and live together as a team, as partners in serving the needs of their family and also the kingdom of God. Her submission is more like her support of his leadership and strengthening him in his role. Sadly, many professing Christian husbands relinquish their role as spiritual leaders in the home, a role which then the wife must assume, by forfeit, in his absence and negligence.

Genuinely attractive

Peter uses a term that implies that the role of the Christian wife in winning her unbelieving husband to faith in Christ is to be an aggressive one (1). Christian counselor and writer Jay Adams says that this Greek word for “win” is a military word and implies that Christian women have the power to either win their unbelieving husbands to surrender to Christ, or their unbelieving partners will decide the quiet and loving witness of their wives is too disturbing and convicting, and so the unbelieving husband will desert his Christian wife. Adams says he has observed these two phenomena and results in his counseling with Christians married to unbelievers (Adams, 94f). Another use of this word “win” is in a missionary context, meaning to “win over” to faith in Christ (Blum, 236).

Wives are to actively seek to win over their unconverted husbands to faith in Christ, but not in a nagging and obnoxious way, which only creates hostility and total rejection of the Gospel. (Warren Wiersbe refers to a Christian wife in the “Bible Belt” of the US who every evening persisted in turning up to loud volume her favorite Christian radio programs, hoping her unsaved husband would hear the message of salvation. She succeeded only in driving him from the house to spend evenings with his fellow pagan friends. Page 70). Peter describes behavior and appearance that are genuinely attractive and pleasing to their husbands and are winsome in behalf of coming to faith in Christ. Believing wives are to avoid bringing unnecessary embarrassment to their husbands, who were given a societal dominance of their wives. Husbands were expected to control their wives’ behavior, appearance and even all their social contacts. What Peter actually gives is a quiet way of revolutionary change in the way men thought of women. If Christian wives followed these guidelines, they would change the way men thought of women, and see them as worthy of respect and trustworthy of more freedom outside the home (Jobes, 207). When wives are sacrificially loving, helpful, kind and considerate they are truly winsome and some will win their unbelieving husbands to the Lord.

In this marriage unfriendly culture, the Christian spouse is called upon to do whatever is possible to encourage and support the unconverted spouse in his or her responsibilities as a spouse, parent and member of society. This means sharing one another’s friends and social activities as well as domestic and work responsibilities.

Some interpreters of Peter’s directive about the appearance of Christian wives have seen this as a prohibition of all makeup and stylish clothing. In this culture, excessive jewelry and makeup was associated with seductive behavior, and pagan husbands would be suspicious if their wives went to their Christian fellowship meetings if they looked like women of doubtful reputation. They would likely be suspicious that their wives had joined one of the pagan religions that practiced cult prostitution (Jobes, 204). What Peter is emphasizing is that Christian wives should concentrate on their inner character, disposition and good deeds, as Paul also exhorted (1Timothy 2:9f). In verse 4 Peter says that every believing wife can beautify “the person hidden in your heart,” the true

wellspring of beauty (Michaels, 161). This focus on inner beauty doesn't mean that wives can neglect their outward appearance. As popular (in USA) Bible teacher Chuck Swindoll says, these verses don't mean that when a wife falls in love with the Lord she can start looking like an unmade bed (Swindoll, 252). Godly women will seek to be pleasant and attractive in every way, but their primary focus will be upon the inner beauty of a godly, Spirit-filled, fruit-of-the-Spirit-producing life.

It's interesting that Peter cites the example of Sarah in her submission to Abraham. We need to remember that Abraham was not the perfect husband, that he had placed Sarah in dangerous positions. We also need to realize that Sarah even challenged Abraham on occasion (Genesis 18). But overall she honored, respected and followed Abraham as her leader, and because of her faith, she was not frightened or intimidated by her precarious circumstances.

And so Peter says that if Christian women honor and follow their husbands, whether they are believers or not, they can do so realizing they are honoring and trusting Christ and are ultimately under his sovereign care. Women who are strong in the Lord need not be fearful or live in intimidation from even harsh and demanding husbands. God will give them strength and courage and will enable them to stand firm and faithfully follow the Lord Jesus, whatever their circumstances (Davids, 121). Certainly women who suffer abuse should seek shelter and realize that the Lord will give them a way of escape (1 Corinthians 7:15f; 10:13). Women who are as loving as possible and appropriately submissive will gain the respect of their husbands, whether their husbands convert to Christ or not.

Next, Peter says that marriages in a marriage-unfriendly world will succeed with...

Godly husbands

Verse 1 implies that most of the marriages in the churches of Asia Minor involved Christian husbands and wives, noting "any of them (the husbands) who do not believe" as the exception. And so Peter has a word for Christian husbands. And we can assume that there would have been married men who converted to Christ without their wives experiencing the same conversion. Although the main idea of verse 7 seems to speak to the relationship between believing husbands and wives, Peter's "apologetic" view of marriage as an evangelistic opportunity would imply that Christian husbands should treat their unconverted wives in a similarly winsome manner. They should respect their wives as God's creation in his image and always with the potential of becoming a child of God (Michaels, 171f). Godly husbands are necessarily...

Considerate

Being considerate means treating one's wife with an awareness of her needs and with a commitment to meet her needs. Paul, whose passage in Ephesians is more theological and thorough in its message to husbands, says that

husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church (5:25-33). In that passage husbands are commanded to care for our wives as Christ loves and cares for us. That means we are to give of our selves to meet the needs of our wives, regardless of their deserving or their attitudes and actions toward us.

Being considerate of our life partner is the opposite of the attitude of self-centeredness and the expectation that our wives are to be meeting our needs. In the 1st Century Greco-Roman culture, there were great pressures, expectations and demands placed upon wives, and they were generally treated as little more than slaves. But Peter says that godly husbands are considerate of their wives and are willing to help them carry the burden of caring for the household and fulfilling their responsibilities outside of the home.

We're all too familiar with the heavy demands placed upon married women, especially upon those who work outside the home as well as have the responsibility of homemaking. Godly husbands will realize that they are to provide spiritual leadership in the home, and if God has blessed them with a believing wife, are to care for the spiritual growth and development of their wives (Ephesians 5:25ff). The godly husband is also to be...

Respectful

We can assume that the command to treat one's wife with respect "as the weaker partner" refers to the usually superior physical strength of the husband, and also the duty of the husband to protect and care for his wife (Moo, 2127). Certainly it is ungodly for the husband to use his physical strength to intimidate or to abuse in any way his wife as the "weaker partner." Peter reminds us husbands that our superior physical strength is not to be used for intimidation, but rather for loving service, including sharing domestic chores around the house that will take some of the burden from our wives. "Weaker" can also refer to the inferior social standing of women in this 1st Century culture (Jobes 209).

Godly husbands realize that their wives are their spiritual equals ("heirs with you of the gracious gift of life," 7) and thus are their partners in kingdom of God service (Galatians 3:28). God has assigned the spiritual leadership role to the husband and father in the household, but is to win and gain the loving and willing followership and support of his wife.

Treating our wives respectfully is bound up with the effectiveness of our prayer life, with the quality of our relationship with Christ. There have been times in our 43 plus years of marriage when I've been convicted, during my prayer and quiet time with God. I realized that I needed to get up from my desk or my knees and go to my wife and apologize to her and make things right in our relationship with each other.

Christian marriage is a partnership, and sometimes God blesses our marriage union with children. And we need the support of a good marriage partnership to produce children not just biologically but children who will become disciples

of Christ. As Malachi says, God hates divorce and he desires the opposite—a godly marriage that will produce godly offspring (Malachi 2:15f).

In a marriage unfriendly world, husbands and wives need to be strong, loving, forgiving and praying couples, who give support to one another, leadership and spiritual formation to their children and a great witness to the world around us. Those around us which know very little what marriage can and ought to be (Wiersbe, 76).

Conclusion:

I cannot preach on marriage without a special word of encouragement for single parents, who have particular struggles and challenges. No doubt that some of these Christian spouses that Peter was addressing soon found themselves abandoned by their spouses who were adamantly opposed to the new way of life of their partners. The family of the church would become even more important to them, to give encouragement and support, especially if they had children to rear. As a church family we have a ministry obligation to victims of divorce, to assure them of God's grace to forgive and to strengthen them with a new beginning in their lives. Those who were divorced before coming to faith in Christ or because of abandonment, unfaithfulness or abuse on the part of their former spouse, need special encouragement. They may well be free to remarry "in the Lord," and if not, God will provide for them as singles. Older women in the church have a responsibility to train and mentor the younger women, and perhaps particularly single mothers (Titus 2:3ff).

Perhaps also the single adults in this church can assist married couples and help strengthen their marriages by offering to serve in the nursery so that these parents of younger children can participate in the worship services more regularly.

Indeed we need to pray for the marriages in our church family, as well as teach and encourage single adults who are contemplating marriage. We need to assist these "about-to-be-married" couples through biblical counseling, providing good role models for marriage, and, if the couple is cohabiting before marriage, we need to offer them homes where they can live separately until their relationship is sealed by a legal and church covenant ceremony.

Peter addressed the importance of marriages, not just surviving in a marriage-unfriendly culture, but also thriving as an evangelistic tool for leading unconverted spouses to faith in Christ (1). In 1 Corinthians 7:12-17, Paul also speaks about the impact of the Christian spouse upon the marriage, saying that the believing spouse "brings holiness" (NLT) to the unbeliever and the children. The Christian spouse is a witness and also a godly influence that brings some of the blessings of Christ and his church to the not-yet-converted spouse.

The Word challenges you today to renew your prayers and efforts to pray for your spouse and, as much as possible be at peace with him (Romans 12:18). Ask God for grace to have the servant heart and mind of Christ to serve your

spouse, contributing to his or her happiness and well-being. As far as possible within the bounds of your being under the lordship of Christ, become friends with his/her friends, share in his/her interests, and avoid being an embarrassment to him/her and creating tension in your relationship with your unbelieving spouse. When you become the best, most loving spouse possible within your power and by the grace of God, I believe your unbelieving spouse will in time either come to Christ. If your spouse's response is to become increasingly alienated, hostile or even violent, the Lord will give you release from an intolerable relationship (1 Corinthians 7:15f).

Perhaps there are couples here who need to commit to the Lord and to each other to renew their partnership in godly living and possibly parenting, so that your marriage is a shining witness to the world around you. By the grace of God, through personal and prayer together, you will receive the wisdom and strength to enjoy a lasting, fulfilling and successful marriage in this marriage-unfriendly world.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Would you agree that ours is a marriage-unfriendly culture? What evidence do you see?
2. What do you think is "appropriate submission" of Christian spouses to unbelieving marriage partners?
3. What do you think is Peter's intent in saying wives were to focus on inner beauty rather than makeup, hairstyles and jewelry? Is he prohibiting all use of these "beauty aids," and if not, what do you think is his point?
4. What are some circumstances that might cause Christian wives to fear their husbands, and what is the solution to such fear (verse 6)?
5. In what ways is the conduct of believing husbands to contrast with that of unbelievers?
6. From this text and Ephesians 5:25-33, what are to be the attitude and actions of the Christian husband toward his wife?
7. What are some of the spiritual disciplines that can strengthen the marriage relationship?

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