

1 Peter: Persistence Through Difficulty

Session 4 1 Peter 3:1-4:6

I. 1 Peter 3:1-7

1. Just as slaves have been instructed to follow the “example” (or pattern) of Christ (2:21), now wives are counseled to do the same. The instruction to “honor everyone” (2:17) is operative here as well. Once again, “be subject” (3:1) means something like “don’t withdraw from marriage obligations but find a responsible role within them”. Just as slaves are not to simply passively subject themselves to their masters, so wives are not to passively subject themselves to their husbands.
2. Women live within marriage as “people who are free” and “servants of God” (2:16). Christian wives are to live within marriage as an expression of their service to God. It is important to note that Peter is not implying that there is a simple equation between a wife submitting to her husband and her service to God. Such an equation would render service to God meaningless.
3. We have to be careful in talking about the “role of women in Greco-Roman culture” as if this was everywhere the same. Some women were taking on public roles. Generally, however, women took on the religion of their husband and Peter does not counsel Christian wives to do this. Instead, he instructs them to become covert evangelists. In a word hostile to Christianity, they are to be examples of Christian character.
4. In 3:1 the wives of non-Christian husbands are addressed. Such husbands may be converted by the example of their wives (providing an example that leads to pagan conversions is a general instruction in 2:12). In what does this example consist? Christian wives are to be “respectful” (or reverent) and “pure” (or holy). That is, within marriage, they are to reflect reverence to God (not the pagan gods!) and holiness (cf. 1:15) or Christiformity. They are not being called to “fit in”. Christian wives are to value interior adornment rather than exterior adornment. We need to be mindful that in Greco-Roman culture dress reflected status and even created it. Christian wives are to reject this. Instead of status creating adornment, they are to focus on the “hidden person” (3:4).
5. Husbands may be won over “without a word” (3:1) by a wife’s conduct. This, of course, may presuppose that an unbelieving husband asks his Christian wife about her behavior and then she provides a witness with a word. There may be something deeper going on here. In the Greco-Roman world, status and oratory were highly valued. Christian wives forsake these for a Christiform evangelism. This is a counter-cultural evangelism.
6. What is Peter’s point in 3:5-6? In Genesis 12:11-20, Abraham and Sarah are referred to as “aliens” and Abraham is a husband to treats his wife unjustly. Instead of rebelling, Sarah entrusts herself to God who intervenes in her situation. In Genesis 12, Sarah follows the example of Christ.

7. In 3:7 Peter addresses husbands. They, too, are to “honor everyone” (2:17). What is said about husbands is more brief than what is said about wives and this may be because the role of the Roman husband did not lend itself to serve as a model for marginal people (“elect exiles” in 1:1). 3:7 addresses not only how a Christian husband should treat his wife but also how he should treat all the women in his household (which might include slaves). What does it mean to live with one’s wife in an “understanding way” (3:7)? It probably means “in a way which reflects your identity in Christ”. The status of women as “the weaker vessel” justified their exclusion from many areas of life in Greco-Roman culture but Christianity calls for an conversion of the imagination for “the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (2:7; Psalm 118:22). A Christian husband must see the Christian women in his household not as subjects but as fellow heirs of grace; to treat them in any way not according to this truth is to hinder one’s prayers. Those who do not live out the call to holiness (1:15-16) imperil their relationship with God. Treating people unjustly (contrary to God’s will) hinders one’s relationship with God.

II. 1 Peter 3:8-12

1. In 3:8 Peter describes the ethos that should pertain to the Church (note that the instructions here are for “all of you”). Significantly, the instructions focus on character qualities and not simply on particular behaviors. For Peter, the Christian life is a matter of cultivating dispositions: (1) “Unity of mind”: This is a disposition one finds among friends who seem to share a common heart and mind. (2) “Sympathy”: This is the character trait that inclines one toward acts of mercy and compassion. (3) “Brotherly love”: This could also be translated as “family feeling” and designates the disposition to treat fellow Christians as family members. (4) “Tender heart”: This is the disposition to affection and compassion. (5) “Humble mind”: This is the disposition which would have been most out of step with the Greco-Roman world. Indeed, this was probably a criticism voiced about Christians! Note that the instructions given to individuals in 2:18-3:7 are to be lived out in a community called to live out the dispositions of 3:8. What Peter says goes against the Greco-Roman concern to keep inferiors in their place and to protect one’s own status. The Church is to be a family in which the character of Christ is formed.
2. In 3:9 Peter describes how Christians are to relate to those who do not believe. The inspiration for this verse is Jesus doctrine of loving one’s enemy (Matthew 5:44). In the antagonistic world in Peter lives, this means forgoing revenge or concerns about preserving one’s status. It is important to notice that this is not a council of passivity. Instead of responding to evil with evil or reviling with reviling, Christians should actively seek to bless their enemies. This is a calling (3:9). Peter quotes Psalm 34:13-17 and its theme is the vindication of the righteous. Note that the righteous person not only does good but also refrains from speaking evil as well. The way we speak has a power to shape us and a power to undermine our witness.

III. 1 Peter 3:13-4:6

1. This section helps to contextualize the whole letter. Peter's main purpose is to offer guidance to Christians suffering persecution. This helps us to see that what was said to slaves and wives was not meant only for them.
2. The question here is that of how Christians should respond to persecution. In order to address this question, Peter has to put their suffering in a theological context. This happens in 3:13-14. They are suffering for "righteousness' sake" and in this sense they are in the situation described by Jesus in Matthew 5:10-11. And since Jesus is describing himself here, they are in the same situation as him. They are not being punished for being bad but, rather, they are being persecuted because of their faith.
3. It is precisely their zeal for "what is good" (imitating Christ) that has brought persecution upon them. It is important to distinguish between current suffering and ultimate harm. Innocent suffering takes place in the larger context of God's deliverance of the innocent and his judgment upon the wicked. 3:14 is a question: What ultimate harm can be done to you if you follow the example of Christ? While we tend to connect resurrection with eternal life, the most immediate connection is with God's justice; God vindicates the faithful by raising them from the dead.
4. Suffering for one's faith only makes sense in the light of the resurrection and the victory of God over sin and death. Persecution will result in suffering, but the ultimate result will be blessing (3:14). Instead of responding to potential or actual persecution with fear, they are to "honor Christ the Lord" in their hearts (3:15). The meaning of this is clear in light of 1:15-16. Honoring or sanctifying Christ the Lord means bearing witness to his character in actions.
5. This is to be done with a "good conscience" and "good behavior" (3:16). The response to persecution is an opportunity for witness and this witness brings together moral dispositions ("conscience") and moral actions ("good behavior"). In other words, witness reveals the true character.
6. The "defense" which Peter calls for (3:15) does not refer to modern apologetics but to a narration of Jesus' suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, a narrative which underwrites Christian action and nourishes Christian hope. Note that the defense to be offered is Christoform in nature since it is to be made with "gentleness" and "respect". Peter has Christ in view here, particularly what he has already said in 2:22-23. Christ was reviled but did not revile in return and he suffered but did not threaten retaliation. An angry, threatening and anxious defense is not defense at all.

IV. 1 Peter 3:18-4:6

1. 1 Peter 3:18-22 is one of the most difficult sections of the New Testament to interpret. It may help to think of this difficult text under two distinct but related themes. The first theme is the triumph of Christ. This would be an important theme for Christians either facing suffering or actually enduring it. The message here is that Christ's suffering (4:18) resulted in his complete triumph (3:22). What is the nature of this triumph? Christ

endured the fully reality of death and went to the place of the dead, Hades (probably understood as the place where both the righteous and wicked dead dwelt) where he “preached to the spirits in prison” (3:19), probably the righteous dead who lived before his advent, and where he fully subjected the wicked “angels, authorities and powers” (3:22). This is sometimes referred to as the “harrowing of Hell”. It is important to realize what is being affirmed here. In his righteous suffering and death, Christ not only preaches the Gospel to the righteous dead and so extends his saving work into the realm of the dead (Hades), but he also fully subjugates all the “powers” in rebellion against God. Christ’s death and resurrection results in the righting of the whole created order (as is suggested in Colossians 1:20). If all supernatural powers are subject to Christ, then this must mean that all human political powers are subject as well.

2. The second theme is the unique suffering of Christ. The connection between Christ’s suffering and the suffering of Christians has already been made in 2:21. Christ’s unique suffering was “once for sins” (3:18) and it has the effect of bringing people to God. That is, Christ’s suffering/self-oblation has an atoning effect in that it removes sin and makes reconciliations possible. Christ’s suffering not only results in the removal of sin, but he is vindicated by God. Although he suffered “in the flesh” he was made alive “in the spirit” (3:18). Christ’s suffering was neither a defeat nor was it permanent. What is true of Christ is paralleled by the lives of Christians in 4:1-2. Christ’s suffering “in the flesh” and this makes it possible for Christians to spend their time “in the flesh” living “for the will of God” (4:2). Christ’s obedience (his faithfulness to God) is mirrored in his people.
3. There is a clear parallel between 3:20-21 and 4:3-4, the connection between them being “flood”. For Peter, the flood is the anti-type of baptism in that in the flood a small number of people (Noah and his family) were brought through divine judgment by means of water. Now, baptism delivers those who receive it through purification. It is not the simple reception of baptism which saves but the new birth which it induces. Baptism must be lived out in the call to holiness. This contrasts with “the Gentiles” (4:3) who live in a “flood of debauchery”. There is probably a parallel between the subjugated rebellious powers and the debauched Gentiles in that both are objects of judgment. The message: neither evil supernatural powers nor evil human powers are to be feared for both are subject to Christ and will be judged.
4. To what does 4:6 refer? Who are “those who are dead”? This verse probably refers back to 3:19. When Christ descended to the dead, he preached the Gospel to the occupants of Hades. While a precise meaning of this may be difficult to determine, its fundamental meaning is not. What we see in Christ’s victory is God’s universal determination to subject all creation to its proper order and this involves both supernatural powers and those who came before Christ. Nothing and no one is left out.