

## Be Subject for the Lord's Sake (1 Pet. 2:11–3:7)

By Jacob D. Gerber

In a period of history with unprecedented prosperity, opportunity, and regard for human rights and freedoms, we find endless reasons to be offended. From the stories published by our news outlets, to the content promoted by algorithm on social media feeds, to the topics of conversation in our closest relationships, we live in what many call an “outrage culture.” We no longer “fight the man”—we end up fighting all the men and all the women, at every moment, and for any reason. Peter calls that kind of “outrage” at injustice the “passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul,” and he urges us to abstain from them (2:11). This does not mean that Peter advocates for a passive approach to life, but only that he urges us to approach injustices in our lives from a different perspective: *be subject to earthly authorities for heaven's sake.*

### Be Subject for the Lord's Sake (1 Pet. 2:11–17)

After reflecting in 1 Peter 2:9–10 on the privileged position of believers (in spite of all appearances to the contrary), Peter transitions into the next section by addressing his readers with a tender term, “Beloved” (2:11a). Peter has many difficult ethical responsibilities to communicate, but he does so with a pastoral tone. This warm term of address complements the stark reality that Peter describes next, that his readers are “sojourners and exiles” (2:11b). Although this is the only use of the term “sojourners” in 1 Peter (cf. Acts 7:6, 29; Eph. 2:19), Peter had previously addressed his readers as “exiles” in the opening verse of the letter (1 Pet. 1:1). There, the term “elect” functioned in the same complementary relationship to “exiles” as the term “beloved” functions in relation to “sojourners and exiles” here.

In the context of the previous two verses where Peter had identified his readers as “a chosen race” and “a holy nation,” Peter explains *why* believers must see themselves as beloved *and* as sojourners and exiles: “Temporary residents in a foreign land are not likely to adopt the customs of the land through which they are travelling. Their standards of values, their lifestyles, are different....they are the people of God, a holy nation, and they dare not conform to the wicked conduct of their neighbours. Instead, they must bear witness by their *deeds* to the kingdom of light.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, Peter “urges” or “exhorts” his readers “to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (2:11c). As the passions “of the flesh,” “Peter characterizes these impulses as merely physical in motivation and intent, centered on self-preservation and material well-being.”<sup>2</sup> Calvin explains well the nature and the dangers of these “passions” (or, “lusts”):

For the lusts of the flesh hold us entangled, when in our minds we dwell in the world, and think not that heaven is our country; but when we pass as strangers through this life, we are not in bondage to the flesh.

By the *lusts* or *desires of the flesh* he means not only those gross concupiscences which we

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<sup>1</sup> Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 75–76.

<sup>2</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 116.

have in common with animals, as the Sophists hold, but also all those sinful passions and affections of the soul, to which we are by nature guided and led. For it is certain that every thought of the flesh, that is, of unrenewed nature, is enmity against God. (Romans 8:7.)<sup>3</sup>

The dangers posed by these passions of the flesh to our “soul” do not merely threaten “the immaterial part of a human being in distinction from ‘body’ or ‘flesh,’ but as a person’s ‘life’ in the sense indicated by Mark 8:35–37....More than mere physical existence [the passions threaten] the ultimate personal good of peace and security before God.”<sup>4</sup>

This exhortation connects back with the warnings that Peter has offered about “the passions of your former ignorance” since 1 Peter 1:14; however, Peter offers this warning here as a transition into the next section, where he will address the way that our passions might influence our “conduct among the Gentiles” to become dishonorable (2:12).<sup>5</sup> The next verse, then, should be understood as a positive statement (“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable”; 2:12a) to the negative statement of v. 11 (“abstain from the passions of the flesh”).<sup>6</sup> Not only will the wrong behaviors “wage war against your soul,” but when Gentiles see good behaviors, they will “glorify God on the day of visitation” (2:12b).

As Peter gives more details about a wide range of specific conduct that he has in mind, he begins with the fact that believers ought to “be subject” to the civil government (“every human institution”; 2:13a). Grammatically, the opening imperative, “be subject,” is the main verb, so that the verbs in the rest of this section 2:28, 3:1, and 3:7 are not independent verbs, but only participles that are dependent upon this imperative.<sup>7</sup> Further, as Michaels observes, this is no mere theoretical obedience to an abstract system, since Peter puts his exhortations in personal terms: “the examples immediately introduced—the emperor and the local magistrates—are persons, not power structures.”<sup>8</sup> In part, Peter appeals to the most general benefits of rulers: “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (2:14). Even if Christians in that culture might not have “expected commendation” because of their low and despised status, nevertheless rulers “deserve submission because even the worst of them preserve some semblance of conformity to pagan standards of good, and that is better than chaos.”<sup>9</sup>

Beyond recognizing the benefits of rulers (even bad rulers), Peter frames a secondary need for Christians to “be subject” to such rulers in apologetic and evangelistic terms: “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (2:15).<sup>10</sup> Still more importantly, Peter explains that we obey our leaders as a way of obeying God as his “servants”:

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, “Commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter,” 78.

<sup>4</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 116–17.

<sup>5</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 115.

<sup>6</sup> Jobes, *1 Peter*, 167.

<sup>7</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 98.

<sup>8</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 124.

<sup>9</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> “God wants us to do good irrespective of foolish men, for the highest kind of reasons in regard to himself as well as also to ourselves; it is only incidental, secondary, that his will is as it is, that by our doing good we muzzle the ignorance of foolish men who seek to find something base in our deeds and in their ignorance do not see that all baseness is lacking.” (Lenski, “The First Epistle of St. Peter,” 112.)

“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God” (2:16). The question of the nature of *freedom* has a long history, even in Peter's day.<sup>11</sup> Peter insists that we are free from human tyranny; however, he also reminds us that we are “servants of God,” who has called us to live in subjection to those human authorities.<sup>12</sup> On the surface, this point may seem like a distinction without a difference, but it is essential within Peter's larger argument within this letter. That is, as citizens of a heavenly country, we are not, properly speaking, the subjects of the kingdoms of this world. Nevertheless, the King of heaven has commanded his citizens to be subject to the human institutions appointed in the various kingdoms in which they sojourn as beloved exiles. Therefore, Peter can conclude this section by mingling together commands to be in subjection to various powers: “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (2:17).

### Be Subject in Service (1 Pet. 2:18–25)

While Paul begins by addressing our requirement to submit to authority at the broadest, most global level, he then continues by bringing questions of submission closer to home: “Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust” (2:18). As we begin this section, we should notice Paul's particular emphasis: the difficult, but important, task of being subject to *unjust* masters. Paul is not offering a standalone treatise of his philosophy of the institution of slavery (or government, above, or marriage, below). As Peter will make clear later in this section, he is seeking to ground “his ethical teaching on the Christian life rightly lived after the example of Christ's suffering.”<sup>13</sup> For Peter, the example of Christ's suffering holds out believers the only possible path to live as heavenly citizens while still in exile within this world. The problem of worldliness is not limited to desires for worldly goods (the “passions of our former ignorance” desire those things; 1 Pet. 1:14), but “the passions of the flesh” (2:11) that Peter is addressing now refer to the indignant, self-righteous, defiant, and vindictive attitudes that arise in us when we feel that we have been mistreated by those in authority over us.

For this reason, Peter says that “this is a gracious thing [χάρις; *charis*, ‘a grace’], when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly” (2:19). In part, the “grace” of enduring unjust sorrows refers to our God-given ability to remain mindful of God while suffering unjustly. Such a response does not arise from the passions and desires of the flesh, but can only be attributed to the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who has been at work in us (Gal. 5:19–24). The word “grace” in this context probably also refers to “that which counts with God or that with which God is pleased.”<sup>14</sup> There is nothing pleasing to God about the ways that we suffer as a result of

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<sup>11</sup> “Christians are called to freedom, but it is not the political freedom of the Palestinian Zealots who ‘recognized God alone as their Lord and King’ and therefore attacked the Roman occupation troops and Jews who cooperated, nor that of the Stoics who struggled for sovereign detachment from the pains and pleasures of life, nor the freedom of the antinomian who flouts social and moral rules to gratify his or her own impulses (e.g., the man of 1 Cor. 5), but the freedom of which Paul wrote so eloquently, a freedom from sin, the law, and the world that released one, not to independence, but to service of God....The danger, of course, was that Christians, hearing of their freedom, would lapse into licentiousness.” (Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 102.)

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 84–85.

<sup>13</sup> “The reader who does not understand Peter's intent in his instruction of slaves, wives, and husbands will not understand the message of 1 Peter.” (Jobes, *1 Peter*, 210.)

<sup>14</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 139.

our sin; however, when we suffer as a result of doing good, “this is a gracious thing in the sight of God” (2:20).

Furthermore, Peter then clarifies that such suffering is not *supererogation* (the false idea that we can do extra credit work in the Christian life by going above and beyond God’s call—even though, when we have done everything, we can only have done our duty; Luke 17:10). Rather, God has “called” us “to this,” and he has rooted that call in the example set by Jesus Christ himself, who “also suffered for you” (2:21). As Calvin writes, “Nothing seems more unworthy, and therefore less tolerable, than undeservedly to suffer; but when we turn our eyes to the Son of God, this bitterness is mitigated; for who would refuse to follow him going before us?”<sup>15</sup> Then, in 2:22–25, Peter offers a meditation on Christ’s suffering from the Suffering Servant prophecy from Isaiah 52:13–53:12, paraphrased and reordered. Peter draws out a particular emphasis from that passage by his own summary statement, that Christ “did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (2:23b). Indeed, Isaiah foretold that the Servant would entrust himself to his Lord:

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied, by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I shall divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:10–12)

Although it was the “will” (lit., “pleasure”) of the Lord to crush the Christ, and although Christ suffered deeply (“out of thee anguish of his soul”), he patiently awaited the vindication that he knew would come: “he shall see and be satisfied.” Here we have no Buddhist or Stoic denial of suffering, but the purest kind of faith that awaits God’s vindication in the midst of suffering.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Jesus healed us by his own wounds and returned us to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls *precisely* so that he might sanctify us by teaching us to trust him as he leads us through the same kinds of suffering (albeit of a different quality) that he himself endured.

## Be Subject in the Home (1 Pet. 3:1–7)

As Peter continues to work his way closer and closer to the most personal aspects of our lives, he comes at last to the marriage relationship. Again, we should remember that Peter is not offering a treatise on marriage, but only talking about the Christ-like glory of submission, even in the most difficult marriages—indeed, even in marriages to unbelievers.<sup>17</sup> So, Paul urges wives to be subject (through a participle rather than an independent imperative verb, as noted earlier) to their own

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 89.

<sup>16</sup> “The Scriptures nowhere teach that believers can refrain from retaliation because they become stoics in suffering and put on a brave face. Rather, believers triumph over evil because they trust that God will vindicate them and judge their enemies, putting everything right in the end (cf. Rom 12:19–20).” (Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 144.)

<sup>17</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 155.

husbands (3:1a). The motivational encouragement Peter offers is the hope that some who do not currently obey the word might be won *to* the word, *without* a word, by their wives' conduct. There is great wisdom in this advice, for "Overanxious wives attempt to talk their husbands into conversion, which is generally a great mistake."<sup>18</sup> Men do not respond well to nagging in general, and Peter offers these wives wisdom about how to reach their husbands by their "good conduct" (3:2) without falling into the trap of "badgering."<sup>19</sup>

If wives may struggle with how to navigate spiritual concerns in their marriage, Peter also warns about worldly concerns that may entangle wives related to the vanity of pursuing external beauty.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Peter urges women to pursue the cultivation beauty in "the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious" (3:4). The language here is complex, but Lenski is probably right when he says that "the hidden man [ESV: 'person'] is the heart."<sup>21</sup> Notice, then, that the goal is not primarily for a wife to win over her husband so much as it is to please God by her heart toward her husband. One key element of adorning the heart, then, is by following in the footsteps of "holy women" from the past, who set examples for "submitting to their own husbands" (3:5), which Paul illustrates by the way that Sarah called Abraham "lord" (3:6a). In addition to good conduct that avoids the vain pursuit of external beauty, Peter also urges women to "do good and...not fear anything that is frightening" (3:6b). Davids offers a wonderful insight on this point:

Here is the other side of subordination. These women's husbands surely did not like their going to Christian meetings and refusing to worship the family gods. All types of intimidation—physical, emotional, social—would be used to force them back in line with the husband's religious beliefs. While calling for gentleness and inner tranquility overall and subordination to their husbands in all areas indifferent to their Christian faith, he encourages them to stand firm in the light of their hope in the coming Christ and quietly refuse to bow to the threats and punishments of their husbands. They are subordinate, but their subordination is revolutionary in that they are subordinate not out of fear or desire for social position or other human advantage but out of obedience to Christ, who treats them as full

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<sup>18</sup> Lenski, "The First Epistle of St. Peter," 128.

<sup>19</sup> Schreiner, "1 Peter," 150.

<sup>20</sup> "Then Peter did not intend to condemn every sort of ornament, but the evil of vanity, to which women are subject. Two things are to be regarded in clothing, usefulness and decency; and what decency requires is moderation and modesty. Were, then, a woman to go forth with her hair wantonly curled and decked, and make an extravagant display, her vanity could not be excused. They who object and say, that to clothe one's-self in this or that manner is an indifferent thing, in which all are free to do as they please, may be easily confuted; for excessive elegance and superfluous display, in short, all excesses, arise from a corrupted mind. Besides, ambition, pride, affectation of display, and all things of this kind, are not indifferent things. Therefore they whose minds are purified from all vanity, will duly order all things, so as not to exceed moderation." (Calvin, "The First Epistle of Peter," 96–97.)

<sup>21</sup> Lenski, "The First Epistle of St. Peter," 131.

persons and allows them to rise above the threats and fears of this age.<sup>22</sup>

Through these instructions, Peter provides wives with a path for pursuing heavenly good, while yet honoring their earthly marriages—even to husbands who are not believers with them.

To the husband, Peter’s instructions are still focused on the mistreatment, so that Peter urges husbands to *avoid* that kind of mistreatment. The phrase “live with” has a similar sense to the way we would use the phrase “living together” or “cohabiting,” in that the term “is not limited to sexual intimacy, but it has particular reference to it. In all their life together, and particularly in their sexual union, the husband is to relate to his wife ‘according to knowledge.’”<sup>23</sup> The reason the husband must be mindful of his wife is that she is “weaker”—that is, she is more “vulnerable”<sup>24</sup> physically, emotionally, and socially.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, he must relate to her with “knowledge”: “The Greek term *gnōsis* has a variety of meanings, but here it is not analytical knowledge or religious insight that is intended, but personal insight that leads to loving and considerate care, whether in the bedroom or in other activities of marriage.”<sup>26</sup>

Husbands, then, are to show honor to their more vulnerable wives for two reasons. First, “since they are heirs with you of the grace of life” (3:7b). Men and women may have different roles, but they are united without distinction in Christ (Gal. 3:28). Husbands must treat their wives with all the honor due to a co-heir of Christ’s kingdom. Second, “so that your prayers may not be hindered” (3:7c). This is a straightforward insight when we understand that negative relationships with other people can inhibit our worship (e.g., Matt. 5:23–24): “As the closest human relationship, the relationship to one’s spouse must be most carefully cherished if one wishes a close relationship with God.”<sup>27</sup> In whatever position we find ourselves, Peter urges us to think about how to conduct ourselves not in accordance with the passions that arise in us to wage war against our souls, but with sober-minded consideration of how to entrust ourselves to the one who judges us justly.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think that Peter calls us “beloved” at this juncture (2:11a)? What are the “passions of the flesh” (2:11b)? How do they “wage war against your soul” (2:11c)? What kind of honorable conduct does Peter have in mind (2:12)? What does it mean to “be subject” (2:13a)? How do we be subject to “for the Lord’s sake” (2:13b)? In what sense are we free if we must still live in subjection to the civil rulers (2:16)?

2. Why do you think that Peter does not say more to oppose the institution of slavery here (2:18ff)? What is Peter’s primary purpose in writing this, if not to end the institution of slavery? Why is it a “gracious thing” to endure “sorrows while suffering unjustly” (2:19)? What was the “example” of

<sup>22</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 104.

<sup>24</sup> Keener, *1 Peter*, 245.

<sup>25</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 122.

<sup>27</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 123.

Christ (2:21)? In what way did Christ go about “entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (2:23)? Where do you struggle most to follow his example?

3. What might suggest that Peter did not write a comprehensive treatment of marriage in 3:1–7? What is his emphasis to wives (3:1)? Why and how might unbelieving husbands be won “without a word” (3:1)? What does (and doesn't) Peter forbid in 3:3? What kind of adornment does Peter advocate instead of clothing and jewelry (3:4)? Why does Peter say so little to husbands? What part of Peter's teaching on marriage do you find most challenging?

4. Where do you face injustices in your own life? How do you feel when you experience those injustices? How might Peter's warning about the passions of the flesh shed light on the nature of your feelings (2:11)? To what degree do you indulge (rather than abstaining from) those passions? Do you recognize any damage that these passions do to your soul? What is one source of outrage that you may need to remove from your life?