Women, Beauty and the Glory of Christ
1 Peter 3:1-6

We're looking at Peter's first letter, written to Christians facing increasing social pressure for their faith. And in response to that pressure, Peter's been urging them to live lives that aren't just different, or stand out morally, but have a beauty about them. That instead of repelling their critics, they attract them to the gospel. Chapter 2:12, '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.'

But from that general attitude, Peter begins to address specific areas where Christians were facing hostility - from the governing authorities, from the head of a household if they were slaves, and today within marriages where a wife had become a Christian but the husband hadn't.

And in his advice one repeated phrase stands out, I bet you noticed it! Verse 1, 'be subject to'. Submit to. And it stands out because it presses all the wrong buttons in our culture. Because our culture emphasises individualism - *not* being subject to anything I don't want to be subject to. And if you were born anytime after the Second World War, whether you realise it or not, that culture has shaped you. So when Peter says in v13-14, 'Be subject… to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors', and in v18, 'Servants, be subject to your masters' and now in v1, 'wives be subject to your own husbands' resistance rises inside us. But it rises even more when you realise he's not just saying submit to governments you'd vote for, or to masters who are good and kind, or husbands who are godly Christian men, he's saying submit to emperors like Nero, and governors like Pilate, and masters who are unjust, and husbands who are not Christians.

What are we supposed to do with that? Well, that great theologian, Humpty Dumpty, said, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean." And we can try and make the words 'be subject to' mean something other than 'be subject to'. But the problem with making a word mean whatever we want it to mean is that soon words have no meaning at all.

So what does that phrase - a single word in Greek - mean?

Well, the best way to determine that is to look at how the rest of the New Testament uses it. And the same word is used for Jesus' obedience to his earthly parents, and of demons obeying the disciples commands. It's used of how the human mind refuses to submit to God's law, but how, as Christians we resist the devil, but we don't resist God, we submit to him. For how, one day, we will see everything made subject to Christ, even as Jesus himself, as God the Son, is subject to God the Father.

And it's because among all its nuances, this word carries this sense of obeying, that feminists describe what Peter writes here as a 'text of terror'. 'Wife, you've got to obey me.'

But are they right? Can a husband take what Peter writes here and use it like that? Or even if he doesn't, is there terror in submission? Well, we're going to see what Peter says to husbands in two weeks time, but for today, I want you to see that instead of terror, what Peter writes here is about beauty. A beauty that, deep down, we're all hungry for.

Wordless Witness

One of the things that's striking about this part of Peter's letter is who he addresses. He addresses them, and us, as citizens relating to authorities, but he doesn't address those in authority. He speaks to slaves, but not to masters. Wives get 6 verses, but husbands get only 1. Why that discrepancy?

Because he's concentrating on those who are especially vulnerable as Christians in a pagan culture - those who lack power or social influence. Including wives.

You see, in their culture, a wife was expected to worship the same gods as her husband. Plutarch, the Greek philosopher wrote: 'A wife should not acquire her own friends, but should make her husband's friends her own' [to which all the wives go, 'but he's a man, he doesn't have any friends!] [And] The gods are the first and most significant friends. For this reason, it is proper for a wife to recognise *only those gods whom her husband worships*.'

Why insist on that? Because the family was the building block of society. Destabilise that, by introducing division into the family, or invoking the displeasure of the gods on the family, and you destabilise the whole of society.

So, imagine a wife who becomes a Christian, and can no longer worship her husband's gods. What will her husband think when he gathers the household around the family shrine to pay them homage and she says, 'I'm sorry but I can't do that'?

And what will their neighbours think when they hear of it? Because they will, won't they? Because it's not just a different God she's worshipping, she's making different friends. Because now she's a Christian, she's started meeting with other Christians in their homes to worship Christ, people who were, in all likelihood, no friends of her husband; people probably of a lower social standing than her; people her husband would have no desire to have as friends.

And their neighbours would see that, and they'd be drawing conclusions about his ability to lead his own household, and the threat his failure posed to the rest of society. So as well as annoying him, this would bring shame on him, in an honour/shame culture.

So how might he respond? Probably with criticism and anger. And how should his wife respond to that hostility? Should she back down, or go on the attack? Well, that's why Peter's writing.

Verse 1: 'Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands.' 'Likewise' not because 'wife your relationship with your husband is just like a slave to his master', or even a citizen to the authorities, but just as Christians will seek to submit to and honour godless government, or unjust masters, so a Christian wife will seek to honour and submit to her husband - not men in general, but her own husband - even if, v1, he does 'not obey the word', even if he's not yet a Christian.

And, in particular, Peter's saying, if the time comes when talking to him about some subject becomes too touchy, and the discussion always heads south, like his need of Christ, or the joy and peace or identity he could find in Christ, or some moral issue, and he tells you to stop bringing it up, you abide by that. You submit to his wishes.

But, if you do, it doesn't mean you stop communicating, because, v1-2, '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*.'

So, on the one hand, Peter's upholding the cultural norm - wives, submit to your husbands. Which is why feminists will go, exactly, he's just caving in to the culture and to patriarchy. But on the other hand - which is why they're wrong - he totally subverts it.

Firstly, as we saw last week, this was a time when all instruction on how people should behave in a household was passed through the husband as head of the household. But here Peter addresses wives directly, as free moral agents in their own right.

Secondly, he doesn't tell them to go back to their husbands' gods and stop worshipping Christ, which is what their culture would have told them. He's telling them to opposite - to embrace the suffering and social shame that comes with being a Christian.

But thirdly, Peter subverts the culture because of *why* he tells them to submit. Imagine Su and I were a first century Greek couple. And I've got beautiful olive skin, wavy dark hair and an adonis body. Why would that culture tell Su to submit to me? Because like all women she's a victim of her emotions and needs controlling by her husband. Because she's morally and intellectually inferior to me, and I'm wiser than her.

Is that why Peter tells her to submit? No. In fact, it's the opposite. You see, Peter knows that these wives understand what's right and true *better* than their husbands, which is why their husbands need to be won over, not the other way round.

And Peter says that can happen, v2, 'when they see your respectful and pure conduct.' And that word *respectful* is the word *fear*. And throughout this section, Peter consistently says it's God we're to fear not man.

So a Christian wife doesn't submit to her husband because she's afraid of him, or because she's afraid of how others will see her or him, and bolster her husband's reputation or ego. She's to submit out of a love-filled awe for God. As Paul says, 'Wives, submit to your own husbands, *as to the Lord*… as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.' (Eph 5:22, 24). So a wife doesn't do this because she's a second class citizen - which is what their culture called her. She does it as a freely chosen act, because she knows God loves her, and has chosen her and has set her apart as his own. And so she fears God, not her husband.

Which also means a wife's submission is not ultimate. If her husband says, 'don't worship Christ', or tells her to do something immoral, she doesn't say 'yes, whatever you say, dear.' She continues to worship Christ and do what's right, even if her husband doesn't like it.

So, this is not Peter telling husbands, 'make your wives submit.' And it's not Peter defending abuse. He never excuses the husbands or blames the wives. He doesn't even spell out in detail what this submission is going to look like, probably because it's going to look different in different marriages. Instead, he trusts these women, who he is speaking to as equals, to work out the details for themselves. But as they do, their disposition is going to be to honour and love and serve their husbands, who may not be worthy of it.

And so, as Karen Jobes, Professor of New Testament writes, it's ironic that words 'that first century wives would have read as affirming and empowering are criticised… as enslaving and oppressive.'

You see, Peter's saying that God can use a wife to change the heart of her husband. That when her words run out of power, her life doesn't.

Which means this has something to say to all of us. Because when you've got a relationship where things have got to the stage where it's impossible to talk about the faith, or where there is deep disagreement between you, you *can* still speak, but it's the quality of your life that does the talking.

True Beauty

Have you ever seen something and almost instantaneously gone, 'urgh, that's revolting' or 'that's grotesque', or 'that's just ugly' and wanted to look away? Or, have you ever stood in front of a piece of art, or seen some view, or some one, and you go, 'wow, that's beautiful'? If even for a moment you've been repelled, or drawn towards, you're acknowledging there is such a thing as *beauty*.

And if some things are more beautiful than others, then something must be the most beautiful of all. And if beauty has this power to attract us, to hold our gaze, to take our breath away, and draw us in, then that must be because deep down we want beauty and we're searching for that which is most beautiful, whose beauty can never be surpassed.

And the Bible tells us, 'yes, and it's God.' In Psalm 27, David says his one prayer, the prayer that sums up all his other prayers, all his other longings, is that he might 'gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.' Because it's only his beauty that can fully satisfy our hunger for beauty. It's why Augustine wrote of God, "I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new!" I've looked in so many other places, but you're the beauty that never grows old, that my eyes will never grow tired of.

But if that's true, then all lesser beauties are pointing us higher. It's why one biographer of Michelangelo, who sculpted the statue of David, said to be one of the most beautiful pieces of art ever created: 'Human beauty as represented in his work is a reflection of divine beauty, and its contemplation leads the soul inexorably towards God.'

Look at v3: 'Do not let your adorning be external.' What does it mean to *adorn* something? It means to make it look beautiful. To attract people to it, to have people notice it. And the way women might do that Peter, says, v3, is by 'the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewellery, or the clothing you wear.' To go for external beauty, to have people notice you or compliment you. To feel good about yourself or have them feel good about you. And Peter says, don't do that.

Now you could hear that dismiss Peter as some guy saying what every other guy in that culture was saying, and say 'this doesn't apply today. Different culture, different rules.' Or, you could say it does apply today, but over-apply it and say 'Peter's clear, women should not be spending money at the hairdressers, or wearing jewellery or nice looking clothes.'

Except, Peter *doesn't* say, don't let your beauty be about 'the *expensive* clothes you wear' but 'the clothes you wear.' So if you want to ban hairstyles or jewellery outright, it's not just the wearing of *expensive* clothes you have to ban, but the wearing of *any* clothes. But if you did that, then people really would think Christians were weird. Westlake, the place where women wear no clothes.

So if that's what Peter's *not* saying, what is he saying? He's saying don't make *external* beauty, and the compliments of others, or the look of a man, or even how good you feel about yourself based on your looks, be your primary focus. Instead, make your priority the pursuit of a different kind of beauty.

Verse 4, ‘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.’

You see, a woman facing criticism from her husband might be tempted to criticise back, or to cave in. But she might also be tempted to try and keep her husband sweet - or just make herself feel good - by working on her physical attractiveness. And Peter’s saying, don’t make that your go to. Instead, look to the hidden person of your heart. Because what’s hidden doesn’t stay hidden. Our characters inevitably show themselves, especially when someone is saying unkind or untrue things about us.

You see, just like you can have a guy who looks really hot, who’s totally ripped, with a great head of hair, and just the right amount of stubble, but who on the inside is a total jerk, so external beauty in a women can be deceiving, Peter says. And you don’t want that - least of all when you’re trying to make the truth beautiful.

Instead, Peter’s saying, you want the reality of the underneath, that shows itself when it is under pressure, to be a beauty that’s imperishable. That doesn’t need botox or fillers. A beauty of character that points a husband to the far greater beauty of Christ. As Blaise Pascal wrote, ‘Every man is almost always led to believe not through proof, but through that which is attractive.’ And Peter would say, yup: and that might just be the attractiveness of the inner beauty of his wife.

Verse 4, ‘the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.’ Gentle because Jesus was gentle and humble of heart, and all of us are called to walk in his steps. And quiet because when he was reviled he didn’t revile back. And that kind of spirit, Peter says, ‘in God’s sight is very precious.’ Because, as God said to Samuel, who was in danger of paying too much attention to external looks in picking a king, ‘Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’ (1 Sam 16:7). And precious because, when God looks and sees gentleness combined with quietness, in the face of hostility, he sees the character of his Son.

Ok, but if Peter’s addressing this to those who are already married, is there anything here for those of you who aren’t but want to be? Is he ruling out dressing in a way that might attract the attention a guy? Well, I’d say two things. Firstly, as Peter says, make your primary attention your character. For all of us, male or female, that should be the case. But secondly, while you should not dress to seduce - and we could discuss what that means - it’s ok to make yourself look beautiful if your aim is to have your outside point to your inside.

Listen to what J Budziszewski, professor of philosophy at University of Texas writes in his book, On the Meaning of Sex, ‘The biggest disadvantage of the plain girl with character isn’t that no young man could ever think her beautiful, but that she finds it difficult to get young men to notice her long enough to see just how beautiful she is. For this reason, I don’t agree with those strict people who would deny a woman a pretty dress or a touch of powder on the grounds that adornment is an artifice. Artifice need not be dishonest. We don’t call it deceitful for a baker to adorn a pastry with frosting, or for a speaker to adorn lectures with jests - so long as the pastry and the lecture are really good. Neither should we call it deceptive for a woman to hang a modest pearl from her ear. If the ornament helps to hold a young man’s attention long enough for him to notice her ornaments of character, it has served truth very well.’ So, pursue character and let your outer beauty serve that inner truth.

But it also says something to you young guys. Because maybe you're looking for, or at, the wrong thing. And stop waiting for the externally beautiful woman of your dreams to come along, because she doesn't exist. And instead go for character. Because there *really* is a beauty that's internal. Go for that and what might not look stunning by the world's standards today will grow more beautiful every day.

Ok, but why do any of this? Why make character your aim, and why, if you're a married woman, choose voluntary submission to your husband, over the individualism of our culture?

Fearless Fear

Verse 5, '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 Peter's referring to Genesis 18:12, where God had just promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a child, despite their age. And 'Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?"' Why pick that as an example of Sarah submitting to Abraham? It's hardly Sarah's finest moment, is it? Plus she's just talking to herself. But that's the point. You see to treat her husband with honour and respect - to call him lord - has become second nature to her, so she does it even when she thinks no-one else is listening, and when she's not at her best. And *that* despite the fact that, over the long years of their relationship, Abraham has given her ample reasons not to respect him.

So how does she do it? Because through the ups and downs of her life, and their relationship, Peter says she's been putting her hope in God, not in her husband or herself.

And Peter says, v6, 'And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.' You see, to be a child of Sarah is to be a child of the Promise. The Promise that through Abraham - and Sarah - an offspring would come to bless the whole world.

And that Offspring was Christ, who Hebrews calls, 'The radiance of the glory of God' (Heb 1:2). The Ultimate Beauty to which all other beauties point. And yet, he became subject and at his trial and at the cross, he submitted himself to men - like these husbands - who refused to obey the word. Why? To win us.

And when you understand his submission, and his love, it fills your heart with awe and wonder, and you'll put your hope in him. And then in Peter's words, you'll 'do good and… not fear anything that is frightening.'

Because how can you not be frightened of that which is frightening? How can you not be afraid of that which makes you afraid, like commitment that restricts you, or honouring another person when the other person doesn't deserve it?

When you know Christ did it for you. And if he's for you, you can love and honour and do good to those who are hostile to you, and win them, by pointing them to the beauty we're all hungry for.