**Husbands**
**1 Peter 3:7**

Last Sunday, as I was standing in the queue for food at the potluck lunch, one of the elder's wives jumped the queue right in front of me. And I said, 'er, excuse me, but did you just barge in?' And she looked at me, as elders' wives do, and said, 'my husband asked me to join him and last week you said I had to obey my husband, so I did' which quite rightly put me in my place.

Well, if two weeks ago we looked at what Peter has to say to wives, today we're looking at what he has to say to husbands. But as we'll see, not just to husbands, and not just to those who want, one day, to be husbands.

And what he says is just one verse. A verse that, in the words of one writer, takes less than a minute to read but a lifetime to practice.

But why write it at all? I mean, if marriage and family, is one of *the* places where we can experience love and deep acceptance, it's also a place where we can experience the greatest hurt. So to write or talk about how men and women relate in marriage is like taking an afternoon walk in a mine-field. So why do it?

Well, I think for two reasons. Firstly, because he wants both men and women to thrive. But secondly because he knows that happiness in a home doesn't stay in the home.

**Attractive Husbands**

Now, for a middle aged Englishman there is a bewildering array of magazines, websites, blogs, podcasts, and grooming products, all designed to get us looking good, and into shape, and lose the dad bod. There was a day when you could go in the supermarket and buy some shaving foam or deodorant and just pull it off the shelf. But now you can't find it, for all the beard wax and hair gel, and eye-brow trimmers. I used to think that I was doing pretty well as a guy if I remembered to brush my teeth in the morning, but now, you have to drink a smoothy, work out, drink another smoothy and a protein shake, apply moisturiser, practise mindfulness, and do all of that before you even step out the door.

Fortunately, Peter's not got any of that physical attractiveness in mind here. It's much worse.

Verse 7, 'Likewise…' And he's writing to people living in a culture where Christianity is being criticised for its effect on society. And so he's urged them, 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.'

In other words, live lives of such character that rather than repelling people, at least some people are going to be attracted to the gospel.

And so far he's addressed how all of us can do that in our attitude to civil authorities, how slaves can do that with masters, and wives with unbelieving husbands.

But now he turns to husbands, to the head of the Greco-Roman household, v7 again, 'Likewise, husbands…' Men, you too must live the kind of life that has a beauty and a goodness about it, that draws people in, that leaves people either now, or on the Last Day, glorifying God because of you.

And yet, while in 2:13, he says to everyone, 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution' and in v18, 'servants be subject to your masters' and in 3:1, 'Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands' when he gets to the husbands, he doesn't say, and husbands be subject to your wives.

He says, v7, ‘Likewise, husbands, *live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman*.’ What’s he doing? Well, as before he is both affirming and subverting the culture. He affirms it by not telling the husband to be subject to his wife. He’s the head of the household. But at the same time he totally subverts it, because nowhere else in Greco-Roman literature or culture are men told to honour their wives.

And so Peter does what Paul does in 1 Corinthians 7. Writing about the sexual relationship between a husband and a wife, Paul says,‘The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body but the wife does’ (1 Cor 7:3-4). Now, at that time, no one would have disputed that the wife’s body belonged to the husband. But the husband’s body belonging to the wife, and he should make love to her for her sake - that was ethical dynamite. No one thought like that until the Christians came along.

And the same is true for husbands living with their wives in an understanding way - literally, according to knowledge. Think what Peter means by that.

How do you understand or gain knowledge about any subject? Early this week I sat next to a young bivocational pastor. As well as training to be a pastor he’s pursuing research in astrophysics, as one does. Now, if I wanted to understand astrophysics what would I have to do? I’d have to sit and chat with him for longer than I did. I’d have to devote some time to learning about it, watch documentaries and read books. I’d have to apply myself to it.

And Peter’s saying, ‘men, do that with your wife.’ Live with her in an understanding way. Take the time to understand what makes her tick, what makes her happy, what makes her sad, what makes her angry, what makes her laugh, what winds her up and what unwinds her, what makes her anxious and what makes her confident.

Now, when it comes to astrophysics, I could go on-line and read a website or order a book. But to my knowledge, no one’s ever written a book on understanding Su, my wife. She’s the book. Sure, I can read up on understanding women generally. But if I want to understand my wife specifically, what do I have to do? Talk to her. Listen to her. Ask her questions and not butt in telling her the answer. And then live according to that knowledge, and changing my behaviour and bending my life to hers.

Let me give you two very small examples, which had an impact on our marriage. I learnt pretty early on that I was better with words than Su. Which was great, because it meant I could win any argument we had. But if I did, I’d lose my wife. So to live with her with understanding was to realise, that’s not her strength, doing that does not help her, or us, so I’ve got to change.

The second thing was that I had/have this habit of leaving my shoes wherever I took them off - in the hallway, at the table, in front of the sofa. And we were years into marriage before Su finally told me it annoyed her. And to live with her with understanding means that from that moment on I’ve tried to put my shoes away.

Now those are relatively trivial, but the Song of Songs talks about the little foxes that destroy the vines - those little things that eat away at a relationship. And the Song says catch them. Get rid of them. And the husband who lives with his wife in an understanding way will do that.

And not grudgingly. Peter says we're to do it, v7 again, 'Showing honour to the woman.'

Imagine how a city might honour a returning olympic medal winner, or how in traditional cultures the young honour the elderly and stand when they enter and fall silent when they speak. Imagine how when a beloved colleague retires, a dinner is held in their honour and words of praise are spoken about them.

And Peter's saying, husbands, have that kind of attitude to your wife. Praise her, celebrate her, defer to her. Proverbs 31 describes a woman who's a wife and mother and she's running her home and business and staff and she is incredibly competent. And you wonder, 'wow, how does she do it?' Well, obviously, because she's incredibly competent, but there's also a verse at the end that tells you something of how her husband's been treating her. Verses 28-29, 'Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."'

How come she's flourishing? Because rather than squashing her, her husband is honouring her: 'Woman, you're amazing.' And Peter's saying, 'men, do likewise.' And as you do, it'll make the gospel attractive.

One night I was on-call on the neonatal unit, just me and a roomful of nurses, and I can't remember how it came up, but we got chatting about Su and I was telling them how wonderful she is. And one of the nurses said, 'I wish my husband talked about me the way you talk about Su.'

Now, what was she expressing? Not that she wished that she was married to me! But a desire to be loved and honoured. And where's she going to find that in a culture that can't even tell you what a woman is?

Years later I got a letter from one of those nurses telling me she'd become a Christian. And she described that what made the gospel plausible for her was watching the way Richard, my Christian colleague, and I treated them as women, and the way we spoke of our wives. So when a local church put on a course to investigate Christianity she thought, why not?

You see, notice the shift Peter makes. He starts by saying, 'Husbands, live with your *wives*…' but then says, 'showing honour *to the woman*' - and it's the general term for women, not wives. Now, there's no doubt that the primary relationship Peter's got in mind is husband and wife. But it doesn't end there. Because in a Greco-Roman household other women would also fall under their leadership and example. Like daughters or female slaves.

And Peter's saying, in all those relationships where you have some degree of authority or influence, with your daughters, or colleagues, or the cleaner who comes by once a week, don't use or abuse them, honour them. Make your home a place where your women thrive. Where your wife and daughters are understood and honoured and you bend your life to theirs. And do the same with your co-workers. And as you do, you'll make the gospel attractive.

The problem is, while all of that sounds great and romantic, often we just want our own way.

**Strong Husbands**

Look what Peter writes, v7 again, 'showing honour to the woman *as the weaker vessel*.' It's the kind of text that can get a preacher in trouble. So what does he mean?

Let's deal first with that word *vessel*. Is he being sexist or misogynistic and a wife is just another piece of her husband's property? Or is he referring to her ability to carry and nurture new life? Because while numerous politicians currently seem unable to define what a woman is, I bet Peter could. And I bet his definition would be similar to that of Abigail Favale, professor of gender studies and author of The Genesis of Gender who says 'a woman is a kind of human being whose body is organised according to the potential to gestate new life.' In other words, a woman is someone whose body is organised around bearing children. She may be single, she may be infertile, she may have had a hysterectomy, or never had children, but she's still a woman.

But even that's probably not what Peter's got in mind. You see, he describes the woman as 'the *weaker* vessel', meaning the man is also a vessel. So he's probably using the term the way other's used it, simply to describe her physical body. And the woman's body is weaker and the man's body is stronger.

Now, I know that there are plenty of women who could beat me at arm wrestling. But the truth is that the vast majority of rape or domestic abuse is committed by men against women. How do they get away with it? Because they're physically stronger. And it's that physical difference that led World Athletics this week to ban transgender athletes from women's events, and to protect female athletes from what Lord Coe, president of World Athletics called 'male advantage.'

So Peter's not saying women are intellectually or morally or spiritually weaker. He's not even saying women are physically weaker in all areas, because women live longer than men, meaning they have greater strength of endurance across a life span.

What he's getting at is that in most marriages, the husband is going to be physically stronger, and in his day have more social and cultural power, than their wives, or their daughters, or any female slaves in the household. And he's saying, men, don't use that physical strength to get your own way, or to intimidate. Don't force yourself, or your opinions on your wife or other members of the household.

Now, in his book Manliness, Harvey Mansfield, Professor at Harvard writes, 'The "weaker sex" is a phrase better left to be understood than to be stated, still less repeated, for it is ungentlemanly to make a point of one's greater strength…. [but] gentlemanliness would not be needed if there was no weaker sex.' It's the very fact that you can get your own way that tells you, don't; don't use your strength, your position, that way.

Jo Hopper was the wife of the famous American artist Edward Hopper. And their long marriage was fraught with conflict, and with him constantly pushing her down. She once said, 'Sometimes talking to Eddie is just like dropping a stone in a well, except that it doesn't thump when it hits the bottom.' You see, he was using his position, his power within the marriage, to not listen.

And the problem is, as men we can use our strength, or our strengths, for our own self-interest. And if we're married we don't want to change our behaviour, we want her to change hers. And we can force that in a way she cannot.

And Peter's saying, don't do that. Instead, bend your strength to her flourishing.

Imagine you're carrying a cardboard box filled with precious stuff, and you know the bottom is a bit weak. How do you carry it? Do you grab it by the handles and say, 'right box, buck up, you're going to do things my way'? No. You change your behaviour. You bend yourself to the weakness of the box. You

support it from below; you use your strength to maximise the potential of that box. And if we do that for a box, why wouldn't we use our strengths to maximise the potential of our wives?

And Peter gives us **two** reasons why we should: heirs and prayers. Heirs first: Verse 7 again, 'Live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, *since they are heirs with you of the grace of life.*' So why should you seek to understand your wife, and honour her? Because she's your equal and heading to glory.

CS Lewis wrote that all of us should 'remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship…' So… 'It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people.' In other words, one day you will see the honour God will bestow on your wife. So live like that now.

But second, prayer: live with her in an understanding way and honour her, v7, 'So your prayers may not be hindered.' It's hard to pray when you've got relational conflict going on, isn't it? Whether at home or work, because we keep playing the conflict over in our mind, and it eats away at us. And it's hard to love God when we're bearing a grudge against another. It's hard to receive forgiveness from him when we won't extend it to another. And if we're always arguing with this other person, or proud and obstinate with them, we're going to have a hard time humbling ourselves before God in prayer.

But it won't just be our prayers that are hindered. I mean if I treat Su badly, think how much time she'd have to spend praying for the Lord to soften my heart and heal her hurts, and all the other prayers she could be praying would go unprayed.

But also, if we're not listening to our wives, or the other women in our lives, what makes us think God will listen to us? It's as if God's saying, 'hey, she's my beloved daughter, if you're not listening to her, why should I listen to you.'

So, rather than use our strength or strengths to please ourselves or serve our own interests, Peter's saying use them to see your wife and all the other women in your life thrive.

But what can make you *want* to do that?

**The Ultimate Husband**

In his gospel, the apostle John tells us that the disciples of John the Baptist were getting worried, because he was losing followers to Jesus. Listen to John''s response, "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete." (John 3:28-29).

What's he saying? Well, running through the Old Testament is this thread that God's people are his bride, his wife, and that despite all their turning away, and running away, all their weakness and unworthiness, God is their faithful, loving husband.

And now Jesus comes and John says of him, he's the Bridegroom come for his bride, I'm just his friend, but he's the ultimate husband come to win his wife.

Now, one of the things Su and I do with young couples in marriage prep is to get them to consider what influences have most shaped their view of marriage. What marriages have they seen that they want theirs to be like, or not. It's a way of making them consider, as a husband or a wife, who am I consciously or subconsciously modelling myself on?

Well, Paul tells us, who that can and should be: 'Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.' (Eph 5:25). You see, John the Baptist realised that Christ had come to claim his bride. But how did he do it? Well, when it comes to strength, no one is stronger than Christ. The writer of Hebrews tells us, 'he upholds the universe by the word of his power' (Heb 1:3). My astrophysicist friend could probably tell me why atoms don't explode, why planets don't spin out of orbit, why the universe does not implode. But the Bible says ultimately, it's because Christ tells them not to, because he's the power holding every other power together. He's the strength above every strength.

And think how this Bridegroom used his strength towards his Bride. Think of the strength he exerted in the Garden of Gethsemane as he resisted temptation to the end, the kind of temptations you and I cave to, the temptation to self-interest or comfort. But he resisted to the point of sweating drops of blood. Think of how he used his strength to resist the powers of darkness as all the forces of hell were unleashed against him in their hour of darkness.

Think of his strength of character as he stood unbowed before the threats of Pilate and the religious leaders. Or his strength to endure their mocking and beating and scourging, and all without opening his mouth - a mouth that could speak words of such power that would destroy them. Think of the strength he displayed as he was rejected by a crowd of his own people, as they chose Barabbas, one infinitely less worthy than himself.

Think of the strength he exerted at the cross, as he bore the burden, the soul crushing weight, not just of your sin, but all of our sin - every sin of commission and omission, every failure to love God with our whole heart or our neighbour, including our wives, as ourselves. Think of the strength that endured to the end, even as darkness and the wrath of God engulfed him.

And ask yourself, how did Christ use his strength? For you. To rescue you and save you and lift you up, and crown your life with honour and dignity that you might thrive and flourish for all eternity in the light of his love. Just as God exerted his strength in raising Christ from the dead.

And when we know how he used his strength for us, will we now use our strengths, or our abilities or our skills for our own self-interest? No. We'll pour them out in service to the glory of Christ and the good of others - and especially, the good of our wives and daughters and sisters and co-workers.

Let me finish by reading you a quote from the Puritan Matthew Henry's commentary on Genesis and the creation of Eve, the very first wife.

'Yet man being made last of the creatures, as the best and most excellent of all, Eve's being made after Adam, and out of him, puts an honour upon that sex, as the glory of the man. If man is the head, she is the crown, a crown to her husband, [and] the crown of the visible creation.' And then he says, 'The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.'