

WHAT EVERY WIFE SHOULD KNOW

by Ray C. Stedman

In a previous message on *What Every Husband Should Know*, I spoke as a man to men on Peter's hard-hitting and insightful words found in First Peter, Chapter 3. Now I must gird up my loins and screw up my courage to the sticking point and grapple with the subject, *What Every Wife Should Know*. Once again we turn to the passage in Peter for the insight that the married apostle gives us, inspired and illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

Peter has two things to talk about to women: duty and beauty -- the duty of a wife, and the beauty of a woman. In both areas he deals with the true and the false. He begins with the duty of a wife.

Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior. {1 Pet 3:1-2 RSV}

Now ladies, no matter how often you read that through it always comes out the same. You find it focuses in the one phrase, "be submissive to your own husbands." The King James Version says, "be in subjection," the Phillips Version renders it, "adapt yourselves to your husbands," the New English Bible says, "accept the authority of your husbands." All of them are interpreting one word in Greek which literally means "to stand under," to take a position under the leadership of your husbands. This does not mean a tyrant-slave relationship. Scripture clearly indicates otherwise, especially in the word to husbands. But it does mean that the wife is willingly (not reluctantly), to abide by the husband's final decisions in matters concerning the family and the home.

This necessity of the wife to submit herself to the husband's authority has been blown up to undue proportions. Dwelling on that aspect of it is like disliking roses because they have thorns -- they also are very beautiful and have delightful fragrance.

Or, perhaps more to the point, it is like that first dive into cool water on a hot summer day: There is a moment's discomfort while the body is adjusting to the temperature of the water, but then there is the glorious relaxation and refreshment of the swim.

There are three important matters that Peter suggests about a woman's submission:

The first is that this submissiveness is necessary in order that the man might be a man. We saw in our study on his word to husbands that the first responsibility of a husband in marriage is to exercise intelligent leadership. And there cannot be two leaders. As someone has very precisely pointed out, "When two people are on a horse, one has got to be behind!" So in marriage, one must follow. If it is the man's responsibility, by virtue of the provision God has built into male nature to be that leader, then the wife cannot also be a leader -- there can be only one. Sometimes we say facetiously that in marriage husband and wife are to be one, but the Bible does not say which one; it leaves the question open; but that is not accurate. It is true that neither partner can be wholly dominant in marriage, for in the blending of two lives there is fashioned one new life. Every married man knows that he is not the same man that he was when he was single. Every married woman knows the same. A new life is emerging, but, in this new life, the male is given the responsibility of final decision. Therefore, marriage cannot be, as we so often hear, a fifty-fifty proposition. If it were that, there would be a divorce the first time a couple had a disagreement in their point of view. One must give in, one must let the other make a final decision. The constant asseveration of the Scripture to the wife is that, in fulfilling her responsibility in marriage under God, she is to yield to her husband's decisions. Thus the degree to which the man fulfills his leadership is up to the wife! Is this not always true, whether it be leadership in business, the military, or whatever? No leader can go farther than his followers permit him. If he gets too far out in front he is no longer a leader, he is isolated. It is the followers who make leadership possible. Therefore it is only as

the wife is willing to permit, and even to encourage her husband to lead, that he is able to fulfill his manhood.

Men have differing degrees of ability to do this. Some lead easily and well, and, with such, a wife finds she can relax and simply enjoy herself. Other men are timid and uncertain in their leadership. With that kind the wife must hold back and whatever leadership she finds she must take, to relinquish immediately when he begins, however timidly, to give direction. Some men are bold and presumptive, even dogmatic, in their leadership, and a wife must learn how gently to constrain and soften this leadership. She must never try to displace it, or to assume it herself, for among the things a woman loves in a man are not only those particular qualities which distinguish him from other men, but simply the fact that he is a man. She loves his manhoodness, his manliness. Part of the essential element of the manhood is leadership. Therefore, if a wife destroys her husband's leadership, she destroys something of his manhood and thereby diminishes her own love for him. This is certainly one of the reasons back of this practical, very forthright counsel on the part of the apostle that wives are to begin their responsibility in marriage at this point and learn to be in subjection to their husbands' decisions.

This subjection is also necessary in order for the woman to be a woman. This is, of course, a corollary to the first. If the husband is going to be a man, and, it takes a wife's subjection to make it possible, then it also takes this for a wife to be a woman. No woman is every really content in the role of a man. One of the dirtiest tricks every played on womanhood was the Feminist Movement. Not that it did not have certain values, and was, of course, a protest against some longstanding and deep-seated injustices against womankind, but, as in almost all protest movements, it went way too far. The claim that women should be free to do everything that men do, and thus to express freedom by imitating men, is a total misunderstanding of the relationship of man to woman and woman to man. The masculine feminist, with her tweed suit and her gravely voice, is a sad caricature of womanhood. This does not mean that a married woman cannot work in business and industry. It means, however, that she will never find there the satisfaction and fulfillment that she can find in her home, her husband, and her hearth, if the conditions in that home are as God intended them to be. This is not always possible, I know, but it is always best.

The third reason why a wife should be subject to her husband deals with the thorny issue of how this is to be done. Women, quite properly, ask questions about this continually. They ask, "How far shall I go?" "What if he isn't right?" "What if I differ with him radically, how much then should I be subject to him?" These are very practical matters.

The answer of Scripture is contained in one word, the very first word in this passage, "likewise." That word indicates an example has already been given and that women are to conform to that example in their subjection. It is the example of Jesus Christ in his subjection to the circumstances in which the Father had placed him. It is described in Chapter 2, Verse 20:

For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. {1 Pet 2:20-23 RSV}

As Paul set before husbands the example of Christ, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church" {Eph 5:25}, so Peter sets before wives the same standard. Wives are to submit to their husbands as Christ submitted to the Father in accepting the circumstances in which the Father had placed him. He did not quarrel with his circumstances, he took them as from the Father's hand. "He endured them," as we read in Hebrews, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame," {Heb 12:2}. He accepted them with joy because of what was involved; so with the Christian wife. Paul puts it in the same way, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as unto the Lord," {cf, Eph 5:22}. That does not mean "as though the husband were the Lord," it means that the Lord in his sovereignty is pleased when the wife is subject to her husband. The wife's submission to her husband is a kind of gauge or measure of the degree to which she is submitted to Christ. In practice, this means the wife is to agree to and abide by the husband's right to make final decisions. The nature of his work, the place where he chooses to live, the friends he picks, all these are

part of her commitment in marriage when she marries that particular man. It does not mean that she cannot have her own friends, but it does mean that she does not exclude her husband's friends from her life.

Using the example of Christ, it is clearly evident there is to be no moral departure on the wife's part from that which would offend her conscience. No husband has the right to ask his wife to disobey her conscience. The Lord Jesus Christ never wrested his conscience in his submission to the circumstances the Father had placed him in. He never lowered his moral standards though it meant that there were a lot of things which he did not himself enjoy or like that he put up with because they were the Father's choice for him. So wives must get over the attitude they sometimes have that everything they do not like is wrong and is a sure sign of the Second Coming. To put it more positively, perhaps, wives are to be for their husbands. That is they are to trust and follow them where they can, as far as they possibly can. Where they cannot, in good conscience, they are still to love them and obey them in every other way. Loyalty is perhaps the right word here.

At this point, Peter hints at a false concept of submission in the phrase, "without a word." In this case we have a situation where women are married to non-Christian husbands. Perhaps both were non-Christians when they got married, but the wife has since received Christ and now is married to a man who does not see eye to eye with her in spiritual matters. "Wives," he says, "are to be submissive to such husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word [i.e., the Word of God], may be won [to Christ] without a word on the part of the wife." "Without a word," does not mean she is never to speak to him, it simply means she is not to nag him. It is clearly nagging that is in view here.

I heard of a man who called his wife Peg although she really had another name. Someone asked him why he did this and he said, "Well, Peg is a short for Pegasus, and Pegasus was an immortal horse, and an immortal horse is an everlasting nag so that's why I call my wife Peg!"

What is nagging, anyway? Analyze it, and it is seen frequently to be a subtle evasion on the part of the wife of her responsibility to submit to her husband. It is an attempt to take over the reins without really appearing to do so under the guise of concern for some worthwhile end. Nagging does one of two things to men: Either the man becomes stubborn and obstinate, or he forms a habit of giving in to keep the peace.

Now, if his reaction is one of stubbornness it is because he feels his masculinity has been challenged; his God-given responsibility for leadership has been threatened. Perhaps very few husbands will actually analyze it this way for this is often a subconscious reaction on their part, but the stubbornness is a sign that a man is fighting to retain his leadership, even to the point of ridiculous obstinacy.

A man I knew was asked by his wife to fix a sagging screen door. He fully intended to do it, but in the next day or so he did not have the opportunity, as other things held his attention. His wife interpreted this as reluctance, and she launched a series of nagging requests at him. After two days of this he decided he would never fix the screen door, and finally it fell off its hinges. He let it lie there for weeks! The wife was simply outraged by this conduct and thought her husband was behaving most obstinately. He was, but the problem was not so much with him (although his conduct cannot be condoned), but the key lay in her nagging threat to his leadership.

If a man does not react that way, his other reaction is even more deadly: He gives in to keep the peace. He finds it is easier to do what she wants rather than make an issue of it, and if this goes on long enough the wife suddenly finds herself catapulted into a role that she is unfitted for and unhappy in -- the role of decision-maker. Out of such situations arise problems of bossy wives and henpecked husbands. It is this reaction which creates the Casper Milquetoasts, the chinless, spineless, manless men who have lost proper authority in the home, and, therefore, lost the respect and love of their wives. Both of them are to blame for this, but the solution usually lies with the wife for, as I suggested earlier, no leader can lead unless the follower will follow. These are powerful forces in marriage and these warning words of Peter are illuminating, insightful, and true.

Now Peter moves from the duty of a wife to the beauty of a woman,

Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and

wearing of robes, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. {1 Pet 3:3-4 RSV}

This is one of the important passages in the New Testament for women, for Peter here puts his finger on the unique contribution which women can make to humanity. It is the glory of beauty. Visit a bachelor's apartment, and, in many of them, you find dirty dishes in the sink and dirty clothes lying around the floor. Even if the apartment is in order it has a pragmatic air. Everything is functional. Things are there only because they are of use. But let that bachelor get married and a woman move into the same apartment, and you will find immediate changes. There are flowers in a vase, curtains at the window, everything is cleaned up, the furniture is rearranged more tastefully. This is what is called, "the woman's touch," and what a bleak and dismal world this would be without it. It is woman's unique ability to contribute beauty to life.

Every woman wants to be beautiful -- the billion dollar cosmetic industry is testimony to that. And women are very sensitive on this subject. They know instinctively that this is the quality they are given -- the right and ability under God to contribute to life, and therefore women feel hurt and resentful when men cast slurs upon their beauty. A man once described woman as "a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair." No wonder a woman, cut by such a description, retorted, "Then man is nothing but a brag, a groan, and a tank of air."

Every woman needs to know that the beauty she is expected to contribute to life must be at all levels, not the physical only. This is why Peter says, "Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes [that is the physical level of beauty], but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight [and man's] is very precious." Woman is to be more than physically attractive. Her real power does not lie in seductiveness or coquetry; it lies in her inner beauty. The great contribution that women can make to mankind is beauty of spirit. Men may have this, but they cannot inculcate it in others like a woman can.

Looking at this world of ours, with its sham and emptiness, its glittering facades and hollow lives, do you know anything that is in more short supply than beauty of spirit? What a challenge to women in every age. So vital a matter is this, and so uniquely is this woman's role, that even secular writers are calling women to follow it. Here is a paragraph from Ashley Montague on *The Triumph and Tragedy of the American Woman*, which appeared in the Saturday Review.

Women have great gifts to bring to the world of men, the qualities of love, compassion and humanity (that is, beauty of spirit). It is the function of women to humanize since women are the natural mothers of humanity. Women are by nature endowed with the most important of all adaptive traits -- the capacity to love -- and this it is their principal function to teach men. There can be no more important function. It could be wished that both men and women understood this. Once women know this they will realize that no man can ever play as important a role in the life of humanity as a mentally healthy woman. And by mental health I mean the ability to love and the ability to work. Being a good wife, a good mother, in short, a good homemaker is the most important of all the occupations in the world. It surely cannot be too often pointed out that the making of human beings is a far more important vocation than the making of anything else, and that in the formative years of a child's life the mother is best equipped to provide those firm foundations upon which one can subsequently build.

Peter closes this word to women with an illustration,

So once the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves and were submissive to their husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are now her children if you do right and let nothing terrify you. {1 Pet 3:5-6 RSV}

On occasion I am asked to suggest names for women's groups in churches. I always suggest the same name, but no group has ever adopted it. It is, "The Daughters of Sarah." It seems a fitting name, for here Peter emphasizes the supreme role of a wife. It is in such yieldedness to her husband that a woman fulfills the function of supplying beauty; that gentle and quiet spirit of great price.

Sarah is one of the most remarkable women of all time. She certainly deserves far more fame than she has had. She is much more remarkable than some of the great woman of history -- Helen of Troy, for instance, or

Cleopatra, or Marilyn Monroe. Sarah was strikingly beautiful. One of the most amazing things ever recorded about women was written about this woman. At the age of sixty-five she was taken by Pharaoh of Egypt for his harem, when Abraham her husband had foolishly jeopardized her safety by a lie that she was his sister. The amazing thing is that this whole thing was repeated again under Abimelech, the King of the Philistines, when Sarah was ninety years old! What an amazingly beautiful woman she must have been. But her fame in the New Testament does not rest on her physical beauty but on her beauty of spirit. By a gentle and quiet spirit, she bound the heart of Abraham to herself so strongly that, when she died at the age of 127, Abraham was simply inconsolable. He wept and mourned for Sarah for days.

Now, it does not suggest in this passage that it was Abraham's idea that she call him "lord." If any of you husbands go home and try to force that upon your wife, I can tell you now what the results will be! This was Sarah's idea. It was what she felt to be an expression of her willingness to be in subjection to her husband. But I would like to ask you husbands, which of you would willingly miss an evening at home if you knew that your wife would meet you at the door with a welcoming kiss for her conquering hero, and a gracious eagerness to please evident in every gesture?

Abraham is one of the great names in Scripture; in fact, he is one of the universal names of mankind. Abraham is honored by three of the great religions of the world. His name is known all over the earth and is one of the very few names that can claim such distinction. The Scripture is surely suggesting here that the greatness of this man is due, in part, to the wonderful wife he had. She set an example for women everywhere. Like him, she entered into the life of faith and became one of the very few women to be listed in the record of the heroes of faith in Hebrews eleven. May I urge upon you wives that you become daughters of Sarah!

Prayer

Forgive us for the many times we read through passages like this, Father, and take them lightly, as though they were merely good advice and not a revelation of such basic, elementary importance to us that life becomes unbearable when we deviate from them. Teach us to walk in these things: as wives, to obey our husbands; as husbands, to love and cherish our wives, and thus to form marriages that become outstanding examples, not only for this time but all time, of what was in your heart when you made man male and female. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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