

1st Peter 3:1-7

The Evangelistic Power of Submission

If any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won... v. 1

Man, before his fall into sin, could be characterized as one who found contentment in his submission to God. He was, after all, created by God. And he was blessed by God. He had everything he could need or want and most importantly he had God Himself. It's hard to fathom, therefore, how man could fall into sin and it's especially hard to grasp that the issue that brought man down was that very issue of submission to his maker.

The devil somehow succeeded in luring man into being discontented with his submission to God. *God is holding you back* – that's what the devil said to Eve in a manner of speaking. *For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil* (Gen. 3:5). So man before the fall knew contentment in his submission to God. Man, after the fall, inherited a sinful nature that made him discontented with submission to God. The Christian, through the power of the gospel, finds the grace to submit to God anew and to find contentment in that submission but he also possesses a carnal nature that he must fight against for his carnal nature still struggles with the issue of submission.

It's interesting to note that it was that same issue of submission to God and being under God rather than over Him or on a level with Him that proved to be the devil's downfall as well. So we read in Isa. 14:12ff *How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! 13 For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.*

Could I point out something here that I'm sure I haven't pointed out in quite some time. It pertains to the practice of women wearing headcoverings during the time of public worship. That headcovering is to function as a symbol of submission and there's a rather obscure statement in 1Cor. 11 that makes reference to the use of headcoverings on account of the angels. What a striking message such a symbol sends especially to fallen angels whose failure to submit to God brought about their downfall. That symbol becomes a form of witness to angels that basically testifies to the woman's willingness now to submit to God, even though she at one time bucked against that submission. Now her headcovering testifies to her willingness to submit to God's order of authority even though she at one time yielded to the devil's temptation to refuse to submit to God.

And so on account of what we were originally and what we became by the fall and what we regained in the gospel we find the issue of submission to be a necessary one for the Apostles to address in their epistles. This topic of submission does not begin in this 3rd chapter of 1st Peter. It actually begins back in 2:13ff where Peter writes *Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for*

the praise of them that do well. Peter then applies the principle of submission to other categories:

Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear – v. 18. Some draw the modern day application of employees to their employers from this category of servants to masters.

Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands 3:1.

Then in 5:5 Peter applies the principle to one more category of people before bringing the whole matter to a general conclusion. *Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder.* There's the specific category. Now comes the general conclusion: *Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.*

This general conclusion aligns itself with what Paul writes to the Ephesians in Eph. 5:21 *Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.* Submission, you see, is something that none of us can escape. We're all in submission to someone. Children to parents; wives to husbands; employees to their bosses; church members to the elders; elders to the presbytery. There is a definite hierarchical order that God has ordained and this order falls under the application of the 5th commandment: *Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee* (Exod. 20:12).

Listen to the way our shorter catechism addresses the way in which the 5th commandment applies: *The fifth commandment requireth the preserving the honor, and performing the duties, belonging to every one in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals.* Such a concept as superiors and inferiors will hardly fly in our modern day culture and that's why the Christian is exhorted to be transformed by the renewing of his mind rather than being conformed to the world.

What I want to direct your attention to today, however, pertains to the impact of rightly practiced submission on those that are lost. A category is specified by Peter in which he states the potential impact of salvation upon a lost husband. Notice what he says in v. 1 *Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives.*

This may be viewed as a perfect example of a person's life speaking louder than his or her words. And though the application is being made by Peter to wives winning their unsaved husbands, I believe the application can be broader. So that's what I want you to consider with me today – what may be called:

The Practice of Lifestyle Evangelism

How does a Christian practice lifestyle evangelism? Consider with me first of all that in order to practice lifestyle evangelism:

I. The Christian Must See the Potential of Lifestyle Evangelism

Listen again to the words of v. 1 *Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives.*

The picture that's presented in this verse is one of Christian wives being married to unbelieving husbands. I know that you're aware that the word *conversation* is more far reaching than the modern day understanding of that concept. Listen to this remark by Albert Barnes on the meaning of this word and this verse:

The word conversation, in the Scriptures, is never confined, as it is now with us, to oral discourse, but denotes conduct in general. It includes indeed "conversation" as the word is now used, but it embraces also much more - including everything that we do. The meaning here is, that the habitual deportment of the wife was to be such as to show the reality and power of religion; to show that it had such influence on her temper, her words, her whole deportment, as to demonstrate that it was from God.

I think it's worth noting that the case Peter has in mind here is the case of an unsaved couple that becomes exposed to the preaching of the gospel. The wife is saved by that preaching while the husband is not. He continues in his unbelief and in his rejection of Christ and perhaps in whatever false and pagan religion he has always followed. Again Barnes commentary is helpful here:

That is, if any wives have husbands who are not true Christians. This would be likely to occur when the gospel was first preached, as it does now, by the fact that wives might be converted, though their husbands were not. It cannot be inferred from this, that after they themselves had become Christians they had married unbelieving husbands.

This last point that Barnes mentions is one worth emphasizing. Christians are not to pursue unbelievers in marriage with the aim of evangelizing them later. Certainly the words of Paul in 2nd Corinthians applies: *Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? 15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? (2Cor. 6:14,15).*

When an emotional tie develops between two people the strength of such emotions becomes the means for justifying just about anything. I remember a man coming to me when I worked in printing who was fervently trying to play down the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. I don't know that this man was a true Christian but apparently he had the kind of upbringing that taught him that there was a substantial difference between Catholics and Protestants. He was engaged at that time to a Catholic and was fighting, I suppose, a battle in his conscience as to whether or not he should follow the religion of the girl he wanted to marry. He wasn't happy with the explanation I gave him about the essential differences between the two religions and in the end his

emotions prevailed and he married this girl. Wasn't long after that that I would see them both with ash smears on their heads on ash Wednesday.

I think, therefore, it makes for a point I should emphasize in connection with Peter's statement here in 3:1 that the kind of evangelism Peter envisions is not something that would justify a Christian deliberately marrying an unbeliever. If you know the book of Acts then you know that the gospel was making a profound and powerful impact in many places. Souls were being saved by the thousands and in the wake of that gospel impact there could be found wives with unbelieving husbands and husbands with unbelieving wives. In such cases the believing spouses were not called upon to divorce their unbelieving husbands or wives. Listen to the words of Paul from 1Cor. 7:12ff:

If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. 13 And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.

If departures were to occur at all, Paul's instructions were to let it be the unbelieving spouse that departs and not the believing spouse. And in the case of such mixed marriages what Peter would have the wives know in particular was that there was hope for unbelieving spouses. They could be won. It might take time and it might prove to be a prolonged and sore trial to the wife but her task would be to demonstrate the power of the gospel in her life by loving her husband and submitting to his headship under God.

Transformed lives speak powerfully you know. And it works both ways – wives toward husbands or husbands toward wives. Many of you have probably seen the movie "Fireproof." It's basically the story of a strained marriage that's on the brink of dissolving. The husband in this marriage is a firefighter who thinks that the nature of his work was such that his wife ought to be his servile slave yet she doesn't have any respect for him at all because of his overbearing cruelty as well as his infidelity through the use of pornography.

In the case presented in this motion picture it's the husband who first gains a saving interest in Christ. And through what turns out to be a tremendous manifestation of sacrificial love toward his wife which takes the form of spending his savings for a boat instead for needed healthcare equipment for his mother in law at a time when his wife has filed the papers for divorce, his transformed life is what in the end saves his marriage and leads to the salvation of his wife.

It's a fictitious and dramatized story, to be sure, but it demonstrates a truth that has manifested itself countless times which is the truth that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation and God is pleased to manifest that power to unsaved spouses through transformed lives. If you've never heard Ron Barnes testimony as to how the Lord worked in his Roman Catholic family to save each member of that family one by one, the last member being his Mother, make sure you have Ron share that story with you sometime.

Perhaps we should have him tell it to us all again sometime soon. So that's the first thing we must see, then, the potential for unsaved members of a family to be saved through the power of transformed lives. The potential is there. That's why Peter says in v. 1 *Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives.*

Let's consider next that if we would practice lifestyle evangelism:

II. The Christian Must Know How to Cultivate His Lifestyle

The emphasis that Peter places on the case of the wife with an unbelieving husband also works across the board whether you're dealing with wives with unsaved husbands or husbands with unsaved wives. It's the emphasis on cultivating the hidden man of the heart in contrast to focusing on external appearance. Look at what Peter says with regard to believing wives beginning in v. 3:

Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; 4 But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.

Peter then goes on illustrate his point with a reference to Sarah, the wife of Abraham in the Old Testament. Sarah was one whose beauty was first and foremost that which sprang from the hidden man of the heart. And from that internal working of the Lord on her heart drawing her to Himself she submitted to her husband.

I think it would be good at this point to expand on this idea of submission to the husband a little bit so that you get a clear picture of what it was and what it wasn't. I read a very helpful sermon in this regard which made a number of interesting points on this score. Here are 6 things that this kind of submission is not:

1. Submission does not mean agreeing with everything your husband says. You can see that in verse one: she is a Christian and he is not. He has one set of ideas about ultimate reality. She has another. Peter calls her to be submissive while assuming she will not submit to his view of the most important thing in the world—God. So submission can't mean submitting to agree with all her husband thinks.

2. Submission does not mean leaving your brain or your will at the wedding altar. It is not the inability or the unwillingness to think for yourself. Here is a woman who heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. She thought about it. She assessed the truth claims of Jesus. She apprehended in her heart the beauty and worth of Christ and his work, and she chose him. Her husband heard it also. Otherwise, Peter probably wouldn't say he "disobeyed the word." He has heard the word, and he has thought about it. And he has not chosen Christ. She thought for herself and she acted. And Peter does not tell her to retreat from that commitment.

3. Submission does not mean avoiding every effort to change a husband. The whole point of this text is to tell a wife how to "win" her husband. Verse 1 says, "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.” If you didn’t care about the Bible you might say, “Submission has to mean taking a husband the way he is and not trying to change him.” But if you believe what the Bible says, you conclude that submission, paradoxically, is sometimes a strategy for changing him.

4. Submission does not mean putting the will of the husband before the will of Christ. The text clearly teaches that the wife is a follower of Jesus before and above being a follower of her husband. Submission to Jesus relativizes submission to husbands—and governments and employers and parents. When Sarah called Abraham “lord” in verse 6, it was lord with a lowercase “l”. It’s like “sir” or “my’lord.” And the obedience she rendered is qualified obedience because her supreme allegiance is to the Lord with a capital L.

5. Submission does not mean that a wife gets her personal, spiritual strength primarily through her husband. A good husband should indeed strengthen and build up and sustain his wife. He should be a source of strength. But what this text shows is that when a husband’s spiritual leadership is lacking, a Christian wife is not bereft of strength. Submission does not mean she is dependent on him to supply her strength of faith and virtue and character. The text, in fact, assumes just the opposite. She is summoned to develop depth and strength and character not from her husband but for her husband. Verse five says that her hope is in God in the hope that her husband will join her there.

6. Finally submission does not mean that a wife is to act out of fear. Verse 6b says, “You are her [Sarah’s] children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.” In other words, submission is free, not coerced by fear. The Christian woman is a free woman. When she submits to her husband—whether he is a believer or unbeliever—she does it in freedom, not out of fear.

This preacher then goes on to describe by way of contrast what this submission looks like and the thing to note here is that it springs from this thing I’ve been talking about that Peter mentions – the hidden man of the heart.

If that’s what submission is not, then what is it? I suggested a couple weeks ago from Ephesians 5 what is true here as well: Submission is the divine calling of a wife to honor and affirm her husband’s leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts. It’s the disposition to follow a husband’s authority and an inclination to yield to his leadership. It is an attitude that says, “I delight for you to take the initiative in our family. I am glad when you take responsibility for things and lead with love. I don’t flourish in the relationship when you are passive and I have to make sure the family works.”

But submission does not follow a husband into sin. What then does submission say in such a situation? It says, “It grieves me when you venture into sinful acts and want to take me with you. You know I can’t do that. I have no desire to resist you. On the contrary, I flourish most when I can respond joyfully to your lead; but I can’t follow you into sin, as much as I love to honor your leadership in our marriage. Christ is my King.”

The reason I say that submission is a disposition and an inclination to follow a husband's lead is because there will be times in a Christian marriage when the most submissive wife, with good reason, will hesitate at a husband's decision. It may look unwise to her.

I like these descriptions of submission both negatively and positively but again I want to emphasize what cuts across the full gamut of relationships and that's cultivating the inner man of the heart. What is given to us in v. 7 must spring just as much from the husband's heart when we read: *Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.*

I made reference to that motion picture production "Fireproof" a moment ago. It's interesting that in that story the husband, at the exhortation of his father, attempts to follow a number of specific steps given in a book that the father provides for him. Initially the husband is not a Christian and it becomes very apparent, especially to his wife, that he's attempting to comply (on a minimal level, no less) with these steps. It isn't until Christ gets hold of him that he then begins to do what he's doing through his heart.

Heart is everything and where heart is missing so will your witness be missing, so will your submission be missing. We sometimes treat evangelism or points of contention with a family as if all that's needed is the power of persuasion to win an argument. Truth told, where there is no heart there is no winning an argument, especially when the grieved family member doesn't consider the other spouse to be qualified to set forth an argument.

Ideally there must be consistency between that which is internal and the argument being set forth and because we all have a propensity in varying degrees to lack this consistency at times, Peter calls for his readers in close connection with submission to be clothed with humility. *Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble* (1Pet. 5:5).

How, then, do we practice lifestyle evangelism? We must see the potential for its power and we must know how to cultivate it by focusing on the inner man of the heart. Before we close let me say a word on how:

III. We Must Recognize the Limitations of Lifestyle Evangelism

It's important that we recognize that when we read in v. 1 of husbands being won "without the word" we must avoid the danger of reading more into that statement than Peter intends. The sources I checked seem to be uniform in their view that Peter is making reference to the preached word. The situation was a likely one that you would have found husbands and wives hearing Peter or Paul or some other preacher of the gospel proclaim that gospel.

And the situation Peter is addressing is that the wife has responded to what she heard when the gospel was preached while the husband did not respond. What Peter is advocating is not complete silence on the part of the wife in the matter of communicating

the gospel but only that she places great emphasis on demonstrating what she tries to communicate. And I make this point now because I call to mind a sermon I heard a number of years ago in which the very notion of what I'm calling "lifestyle evangelism" was being criticized. The basis for the criticism was that those that were practicing "lifestyle evangelism" were excusing themselves from communicating the gospel at all.

It is true that we need to establish rapport with those we would try to win to Christ. But when it takes 5 or more years to establish that rapport and all during that time not a word is ever spoken for Christ then something has gone amiss. And this can become an easy temptation to yield to when it comes to communicating the gospel. *Oh, I'm trying to live the gospel that I may some day gain the chance to share it.*

And this temptation becomes all the more stronger when you realize that the gospel by its very nature is confrontational. What did Peter preach on the Day of Pentecost? Basically he preached that the long awaited Messiah had come. The very One who was at the center of why the Jews even existed had come and they could do no better than to take Him and crucify Him. Peter accused the Jews of the greatest crime conceivable in the minds of the Jews. He confronted them, in other words. And had the Holy Spirit not moved on that Day they no doubt would have done to Peter what they did a few chapters later to Stephen. They executed him when he preached Christ to them.

And when you know that the gospel by its very nature confronts men in their sins while at the same time you're trying to build rapport with your neighbor then it becomes very tempting to avoid the confrontation for fear that it will disrupt the friendship. I spoke to a man who is now an elder in our church in Phoenix some while back. This man told me how he had built a friendship with a man from India and how he wanted to share the gospel with this man. Eventually he did share the gospel and when this Indian was faced with the truth of the exclusivity of Christ his friendship took some big steps backwards. Since that time this elder has told me that his friendship is still intact with the man but it's apparently a much more guarded friendship now.

And now this man from India knows or at least he's heard – *there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.* So we do well to ever keep in mind the truth of Romans 10:17 *So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* We do well to remember that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes. We do well to call to mind the Lord's power to open Lydia's heart and the Lord's power to knock the Apostle Paul himself off his high horse and save his soul. There is no heart so hard that it's beyond the power of the Holy Ghost.

And we do well to remember that the power of a transformed life in which the inner man is cultivated in a true and genuine walk with Christ is a means that the Lord uses, in connection with His Word to save sinners, to save loved ones, to save even unsaved spouses. *Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives.*