

Message 3

As mentioned earlier, there are two main themes in this letter. The theme of the previous message was the Conduct and Attitude of the Believer. This message will focus on a new theme — Interpersonal Relationships. Peter gives lots of practical advice about how believers are to relate to the people around them.

Practical Advice Concerning Interpersonal Relationship

I Peter 2:11-3:17 The theme of Interpersonal Relationships covers the middle section of the letter. Peter wrote his instructions to different groups of believers. Verses 11-17 are for everyone; Peter refers to these readers as “Dear friends.” Beginning in verse 18 his instructions are for “slaves.” In chapter 3, beginning in verse 1, there are some instructions for wives. In verse 7 the instructions are for husbands, and verses 8-17 are for everyone.

The first step in knowing how to relate to people is to clearly understand ourselves. We need to know who we are as believers and why we are here on earth. Peter reminds us of this in I Peter 2:11-12 (Read).

First we are to remember that we are “aliens and strangers in the world.” Peter used the word “stranger” in two previous verses: in the very first verse of the letter, and in 1:17. This is an important principle for believers to remember. If we know that we do not belong to the world, we have a special kind of freedom as we live in the world. We can think of ourselves as visitors, with no permanent attachments, no roots. We will be content in knowing that we will leave everything behind some day.

God has called us out of the world. In our behavior and our spiritual thinking, we are not to be part of the world. Our sense of significance and identity is not in this world. However, we need to remember that God has sent us into the world to serve as His representatives. The specific words of Jesus are: “Go into all the world and make disciples of all the people groups of the world” (*Matthew 28:18-19*). That is the only reason we are still in the world. Jesus also said to His disciples: “as the Father has sent me into the world I am sending you” (*John 20:21; see also John 17:15-18*).

Verses 11 and 12 explain how we are to live as strangers here on earth. We are “to abstain from sinful desires” and we are “live good lives among the pagans” who surround us. “Abstain from sinful desires” and “live good lives.” These qualities are not easy for believers. In fact, it is impossible for believers to fulfill these commands in their own strength. It requires the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. It requires believers to adapt their lives “to Jesus, the living Stone.” Only then will they become more and more like Jesus Christ and become more and more like the “living stones” that God the Father will use in building His spiritual house.

Throughout this letter, Peter emphasizes that the people who have the correct spiritual perspective have a long range view of their existence. They know that they are members of God's family, and that their citizenship is in heaven. They know that they have been justified by the death of Jesus Christ and will some day be glorified and qualified to stand in the presence of Almighty God for eternity. Because they know these things, they do their best to lead a sanctified life here on earth. They endeavor to live in the power of the Holy Spirit, and not be controlled by the influences of the devil.

On the other hand, Satan wants us to have a short-term outlook on life. He wants us to focus on the here and now. He wants us to gratify our present earthly physical desires and he seeks to distract us from thoughts about the future. The desires of our bodies are not evil or sinful in themselves. God created us with all our appetites and feelings, physical needs and desires. However, sin perverts these desires, and the devil tempts us to satisfy the desires of our bodies in ways which are contrary to God's will. We must not give in to these wrong ways. We must be separated from the spiritual corruption of the world, not yielding to the destructive sinful desires which have corrupted this world.

The devil wants to make us like the people who are under his control. If we are controlled by the same fleshly desires which influence the thinking and behavior of unsaved people, then they will not be able to recognize any differences between God and the devil. In contrast to earthly lifestyles, we are to (v12) "live such good lives among the pagans that they may see our good deeds and glorify God." Unsaved people will recognize the power of God only if we are different kinds of people and live in godly ways.

In His prayer to the Father shortly before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus prayed concerning His disciples: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (*John 17:15-18*).

The phrase "live such good lives" means to maintain a good reputation. The phrase implies that we are to be consistent in our behavior over a long period of time. There is an idiom which I am sure you have heard: "What you are doing speaks so loudly that I can't hear what you are saying." The lifestyle of the believer is often more important than our verbal witness. Believers need to keep this principle of behavior in mind. Non-believers will watch us to find out if our "walk matches our talk."

Our objective is to get pagans "to glorify God," to give Him honor. We must be models of a godly lifestyle if we expect others to be pointed to God. But notice how the godly lifestyle of believers was in itself a kind of barrier which prevented the pagans from accepting Christianity. Pagans slandered and ridiculed the faith and behavior of believers, even "accusing them of doing wrong."

Let me explain the background to that phrase, “accusing believers of doing wrong.” At the time Peter wrote this letter, Christians were accused of being irreligious because they refused to worship the many Roman and Greek gods and goddesses. They were accused of being “atheists” because they had no idols in their homes! Christians were accused of being counter-cultural because they did not participate in the many pagan festivals. Christians were accused of being disloyal to the Roman empire because they refused to worship the Emperor and instead claimed allegiance to a heavenly King.

Unfounded and invalid criticisms directed to believers cannot be avoided, but believers must under no circumstances give the people of the world valid reasons for reproach. Unfortunately, we frequently learn about the moral and ethical failures of Christian leaders, which just reinforces the negative opinions of non-believers about Christians and makes it more difficult to convince non-believers of the truth of God. What we must try to do is to “live such good lives among the pagans that” we can overcome all the negative opinions that people have about us and our God and lead them to “glorify God.”

This thought continues in the following verses. Read I Peter 2:13-17. One of the most dramatic ways to demonstrate the Christian lifestyle is to be submissive. “Submission” is an important word in this section of the letter. Chapter 2, verse 13, instructs us to be submissive “for the Lord’s sake.” This phrase indicates that believers are to point beyond themselves to the Lord. What we do, we do for the Lord and for the advance of His Kingdom. Remember what Peter wrote in I Peter 2:9-10: We are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

The words “submit yourselves” is a term which was frequently used in a military context. It means to “place yourself under the authority of another.” We are to consider others better than ourselves. Instead of focusing on ourselves and our interests, we practice a voluntary subordination of ourselves to others. When we submit ourselves to another person, we show honor to that person.

Verse 13 explains that we must “submit ourselves ... to every authority instituted among men.” Who might this include? Peter mentions “the king as the supreme authority,” and “governors.” In later passages he mentions additional examples. In our lifetimes, we place ourselves under many authority figures — parents, church leaders, school teachers, employers, and many other individuals. Sometimes we resented the demands of people who were in authority over us. We protested, we fought back, we became angry, we did not want to cooperate, but Peter informs us that these attitudes are not the appropriate behavior of a believer.

Believers are to live a life of submission to others, whether or not the persons exercising authority are believers. When Peter wrote this letter, the king was Nero, the Roman emperor, who was one of the most cruel leaders in Roman history. The point of verse 14 is that all governmental and civil authorities have been appointed by God for the greatest good of the largest number of people. Yes, it is a human system, and there is a lot of injustice and corruption in every human system. However, we need to keep in mind that God initiated the system of human government [*back in Genesis 9*], and the person who disobeys a human ruler indirectly disobeys God. Humans need structure and order. No kind of society is possible without some kind of authority structure. The absence of rule is anarchy. Any government is better than no government at all.

Verse 15 states another way that “good behavior” will have a positive influence on society: it will “silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” The word “foolish” is a common adjective for an obstinate sinner. Verse 15 helps us to understand verse 12. The accusations of pagans is the “ignorant talk of foolish people.” Good behavior by believers is the way to silence this “ignorant talk.” It is also the way to honor God.

There is an interesting comparison in verse 16: believers are both “free men” and “slaves” at the same time. Freedom for us does not mean freedom to do as we want; freedom means being able to choose to do what God wants us to do. Free people are able to make decisions/choices for themselves. Non-believers are unable to choose to obey God because they are controlled by the devil. However, for the believer, freedom and obedience cannot be separated. In order to please God, we are expected to voluntarily choose to be the slaves of God, and to be obedient to Him.

I need to clarify an important point here. There are limits to submission. Peter doesn't explain these limits in this letter, but there are some guidelines in other passages. If an earthly authority demands that we do something which is a violation of God's laws, then we have no choice but to disobey the authority. This basic principle was followed by Peter in Acts 4:16-19; also Acts 5:27-29. Generally speaking, believers must submit to the authority of human government, but if the human authorities are out of step with God's moral laws, then obedience must be to God.

There are four short but important commands in verse 17. Verse 17 is like a summary of the obligations of Christians to others. First, believers are to “honor all people.” The reason that respect and honor must be extended to everyone goes back to creation. All humans were created in the image of God and bear the image of God. People are to be honored because God considered people to be valuable and important. God loves people so much that Jesus died for them.

Second, believers are to love other believers because they are members of God's family. Third, believers are to “fear God.” This means that we are to recognize that He is Lord over everything, and therefore is to be honored more than everything else and obeyed. Fourth, believers are to “honor the king.” There is a contrast between honor for God and honor for people. God is to be feared, but the king need only be honored. Normally, duties to God and the government authorities do not conflict, and believers can obey both (*see Matthew 22:15-21*) but in special cases God alone must be obeyed (*see Acts 5:29*).

According to Peter, when we show respect to people, show love to our fellow believers, fear God, and honor the king, God is pleased with us and unbelievers around us are impressed.

Verses 11-17 explain the basic principles of “submission.” These basic principles are next applied to specific groups of people.

I Peter 2:18-25 Slavery is a fact of human history. God did not encourage forms of human bondage, but rather tried to control and regulate the abuses of slavery. In the Roman empire, 50% of the population was in some kind of indentured service. Normally slaves resented their position in life. They had no rights of their own. The natural response of many slaves was anger and a desire for revenge.

Many slaves became believers in the early centuries and, as Christian slaves, they were to live differently than non-believing slaves. Christian slaves were to “submit themselves to their masters with all respect,” even to masters who were cruel and harsh. Verse 19 is similar in meaning to verse 13: the believing slave was to endure “the pain of unjust suffering” “for the Lord’s sake.” Even slaves were to “live such good lives” among their cruel and harsh masters that their masters may “glorify God.”

Verses 20-21 explain the point yet another way. Wrong behavior deserves punishment. “but if you suffer unjustly for doing good, ... this is commendable before God.” As believers, we are called to endure injustice, just as Christ endured His suffering. Christ is our great example; He suffered injustice and evil even though He did only good things. How did Christ act? Read verse 22, then verse 23. Believers are not to retaliate, or make threats. Instead we are to commit the situation to God; to “entrust” ourselves to God. It is difficult for us to trust and obey when we are suffering, but God is honored when we place ourselves in His care. Notice verse 21 states that we are “called to this.”

Now chapter 3. Before we think about verses 1-7, we need to understand the husband / wife relationships of the Jewish people in the 1st Century. In some ways the situation then was very different than at present, and in some ways similar. Wives generally did not have the same legal rights as their husbands. Wives were not the property of their husbands, but neither were they equals. Wives were not employed in businesses, and they spent most of their time in their homes. Husbands and wives usually shared the work and responsibilities of life. The Jewish situation was shaped by centuries of cultural conditioning, and what Peter wrote about wife / husband relationships reflected his cultural background. Keep that in mind as we think about verses 1-7.

Verse 1 is another restatement of verse 12. Believing wives are to “live such good lives” that their unbelieving husbands “will be won over.” Wives were to have a moral, “pure,” and “reverent” behavior. Their beauty was to be in their attitudes and personalities rather than in external adornments. In the Jewish context, the wife was to be submissive to her husband, honoring him and obeying the husband as the head of the household.

Notice the phrase in verse 1 “in the same way.” This phrase links back to verses 18 and 13. Wives were to be submissive to their husbands as slaves were to submit to their masters, and as all believers were to submit themselves to human authorities. The point is that there is an authority structure in the home just as there is an authority structure in all interpersonal relationships. Note: being submissive to someone does not imply inferiority or lesser importance.

Now notice verse 7. Husbands are to behave “in the same way,” which is the way of honoring and respecting and submitting to one another. The words Peter used mean to “assign them honor.” The way that the husband shows honor and respect to his wife is through kind, considerate, helpful behavior. It has to do with appropriate treatment of the wife.

Notice that wives are considered as equals with their husbands in spiritual matters. Verse 7 states that wives are “joint heirs with husbands in the gracious gift of life.” From a heavenly, spiritual standpoint, husbands and wives are equal. The instructions to husbands are concerned with earthly physical activities — living with them, helping them because they are the physically weaker partner in the marriage relationship.

Notice that there is a warning for husbands. Notice also that there are no warnings for the other people mentioned in this section. If husbands do not treat their wives properly, their prayers will be hindered. There is no place for selfishness and egotism in the marriage relationship. Prayers represent communion and dialogue with God, and prayers can be hindered when husbands disregard God’s instructions concerning husband / wife interpersonal relationships.

In the remaining verses of chapter 3 Peter gives more general instructions about relationships. He no longer focuses on any specific groups, such as slaves, wives, and husbands, but once again speaks to all believers (“all of you”). Notice the commands:

“Live in harmony with one another.” This means to “be of one mind.” This does not mean that everyone has to have the same opinion about all matters, but rather to respect and honor one another. Believers must want to get along with each other and to be in fellowship with each other.

“Be sympathetic.” Believers must share the feelings of others.

“Love as brothers.” Believers must share their resources with others. They must put the needs of others ahead of personal needs. (*See 1 John 3:17-18.*)

“Be compassionate.” This means to be loving and gentle, to treat others as you would like to be treated.

“Be humble.” Believers must place themselves under others, to consider others better than themselves.

In verse 9, Peter once more emphasizes **“submissiveness.”** Believers must not retaliate. They must instead bless those who mistreat them.

The quotation in verses 10-12 is from Psalm 34 [Note to translator, in Russian Bible this is Psalm 33]. In that Psalm, the words “life” and “good days” refer to earthly life and joys. Good behavior will lead to a better quality of life here on earth.

The conclusion of this passage is I Peter 3:13-17. Read. The citizenship of believers is in heaven, but there are guidelines to help us live on earth. These guidelines are to help us to be different than unsaved people. The ultimate purpose is the glory of God.