

1 Peter 2:11-17; 3:7-11 (NRSV)

¹¹Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹²Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

¹³For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. ¹⁵For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. ¹⁶As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.

¹⁷Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

⁷Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.

⁸Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. ¹⁰For

“Those who desire life
and desire to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit;
¹¹let them turn away from evil and do good;
let them seek peace and pursue it.

It is easy to turn inward when things get tough, when we feel pressed in upon from all sides. In his letter of encouragement, Peter begins to turn our attention outward.

This is the fourth in our six-part study, *Restoring Hope in Tough Times*. Peter's encouragement to the suffering believers has, to this point, focused on themselves, as individuals or as a community. He has reminded them of their Easter hope. He has urged them to be ready for action, to discipline themselves, to embrace anew a holy life. Last week, we saw that Peter picked them up and told them that God had called them for a reason, to proclaim God's mighty acts. Today, Peter turns the believers toward others, not only their families and households, but to all those among whom they lived.

The Weaker Sex??

There are some (no, many) places in Scripture, such as 1 Peter 2:7, that slap us upside the head, forcing us to remember that these are the writings of people who lived thousands of years ago. They don't share all our values and sensibilities. Their worldviews, even those of the apostles, varied considerably from our own.

For example, it is difficult for me to really imagine that there was a time when slavery was not only acceptable, but understood to be the “natural” order of things. Paul and Peter lived in such a world. Neither advocated the end of slavery. I doubt either of them envisioned a world without slavery, short of the world's remaking at the time of Christ's return. They both had much to say about what it meant to be a *Christian* slave-owner or a *Christian* slave. But the abolition of the institution would take the better part of two millennia and yet, when the movement began, it was begun by Christians.

(cont.) in the p. 2 textbox

Today's first passage begins a lengthy section of Peter's letter, 2:11-4:11, that focuses on how these believers are to live in the midst of indifference and even outright hostility that has led to their alienation and suffering. Should they isolate themselves and build fences within which they can strive to live the Jesus way? Should they march out ready to do battle, at least figuratively, with all who oppose them or have caused them pain and loss?

The Weaker Sex??

(cont. from the p. 1 textbox)

The same with the place of women in the ancient world. The cultures were patriarchal. Women were poorly educated and expected to largely stay in the private arena of the home. They simply were not seen as being as capable or strong or trustworthy as men. Women couldn't even testify in a Jewish law court!

When you meet a woman in the Bible who has an active and public life, you can bet that you are meeting a formidable person.

I once heard a lecture by a scholar of ancient Greece and Rome. It was entitled: "Less Than Human: Women and Slaves in the Greco-Roman World." You hardly need anything but the title to get the lecturer's point.

Here's another illustration of my point. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is built in part on a foundation of the Gnostic writings of the 2nd-4th centuries, the most well-known of which is the Gospel of Thomas, a 2nd century writing. At the end of the list of Jesus' secret sayings, Jesus tells Peter that he is going to make Mary Magdalene a male so she can be a "living spirit" like the rest of the guys. Jesus says, "For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom." The Gnostics, you see, seemed to believe that females were males whose development had been stunted and thus needed to complete their growth to full, kingdom-ready, personhood.

Needless to say, we need to let ourselves be a bit pleasantly surprised whenever the apostles lift a woman to a prominent place in the movement, such as Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia. We need to cheer when Paul writes that in Christ, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

David Bartlett¹ highlights two ways these passages are often read. John Elliot's reading is that these believers are genuine outcasts from society and that their concern was to form a strong group identity:

For the Christian community, in other words, there exists a different standard of values, namely the will of God in the exemplary obedience of Jesus Christ, which distinguishes it from outside society. In the estimation of the Gentiles, the Christians amount only to a motley collection of lowly aliens, ignoble slaves, religious fanatics and "Christ-lackeys" obsessed with self humiliation. Within the family of God however, and in God's estimation, Christians enjoy a new status which can only be retained by avoiding conformity to the degrading social norms of the Gentiles.

David Balch, on the other hand, looks at Peter's "household code" and hears Peter urging these believers to live virtuously as an example to those who persecute them.

Bartlett rightly notes that these communities probably embraced both perspectives. We sometimes sum this dilemma up with a phrase like, "be in the world but not of the world." We, like these Christians in Asia Minor, can't very well just withdraw from the world. Jesus told us to go to the ends of the earth and make disciples. "You are the light of the world," Jesus told his disciples. "Let your light shine before others . . ."

No, we can't withdraw from the world, even when tough times might make us feel like we want to. We are to be a witness to others, honoring God in all that we do. We are to be honorable people of a "tender heart and a humble mind," even as we strive to preserve and to grow not only our families but the body of Christ.

Thus, Peter tells the husbands that they are to honor their wives. The women who are

¹David Bartlett's commentary on 1 Peter is found in the *New Interpreters' Bible*. The quote from Elliott is from a quotation in Bartlett.

married to unbelievers are to remind themselves that the “purity and reverence” of their lives may win their husbands over to Christ. Slaves are to accept their masters’ authority, even that of masters who are harsh.² If they or, for that matter, any believer suffers, they at least know that Christ suffered for them. All are to honor everyone, even the emperor!

“Seek Peace and Pursue It”

Peace so often eludes us. We find ourselves to be anxious and uncertain, unsure of where to turn next or how to go about finding the life we seek. The ancient Jews understood that the peace we seek can be found only in our relationship with God. They had a word for this: *shalom*. It cannot be translated with a single word. *Shalom* is prosperity, health, peace, wellness, completeness, safety, harmony, satisfaction, fulfillment, unity, victory, restoration.

Though we usually think of peace in the sense of our own inner peace, *shalom* for the ancient Jews was often a relational word, nearly synonymous with justice. It was about two persons living in an equitable, often covenantal, relationship. Thus, in the Old Testament, *shalom* can come when a payment is made or an obligation is met, for equity is restored between the two parties. Payment of the tithe, what was to be returned to God, was crucial to maintaining the Israelites’ covenantal relationship with YHWH.

Simply put, *shalom* is the restoration of wholeness. It is well-being and is bound up with our relationship with God. Only when we love God and love neighbor, which is the heart of that relationship and which is grounded in action, can we find the peace we seek and that God desires for us.

But we cannot expect to find this peace so long as we hold back any portion of ourselves or our life, as if what matters is *only* our time or *only* our talents or *only* our money. And it won’t come if we give from the leftovers, rather than from the first fruits of our lives and work. The wholeness that is *shalom* is just that, encompassing all that we are and have, holding nothing back.

In all their relationships, perhaps especially so amidst the tensions and stresses of hardship, the believers are to “have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.”

“Doing good”

In 3:10-11, Peter draws on Psalm 34:12-16 to help the believers see better the shape of this life to which they have been called and which will sustain them through their present hardships. Peterson paraphrases the psalmist’s words this way: “Turn your back on sin, do something good; Embrace peace – don’t let it get away!”

As I reflected on this passage and my own “desire to see good days,” as the psalmist put it, I was drawn to the simple encouragement to do something good. Perhaps the words particularly caught me because of St. Andrew’s recent 1000-hr Work Day which, by the way, ought to be called the “2500-Work Day” or thereabouts!

Having survived tougher times in my life than this deep recession, I know well that it was so tempting to withdraw from the world, to crawl into a corner and lick my wounds.

But Christ calls us to reach out to others, to family and friends, even to strangers. Reach out not so much looking for help, but seeking to provide help. Tough times challenge us to get outside ourselves, to see that there are those who desperately need our help.

I write this on the opening day of St. Andrew’s Seven Loaves food pantry. I think Peter would say, “That’s what I’m talking about!”

²Again, verses such as this fall hard on ears and on our hearts. The choice is either to ignore them, pretending they are not there, or try to read them within their historical context and strive to discern meaning for ourselves. The fact that these sorts of verses were horrifyingly misused to justify slavery in America, wouldn’t blind us to the fact that even here, God may have a message for you and for me.

Those Troublesome Household Codes

Today's passages from 1 Peter resemble what the ancients knew as a "household code." These codes were advice and instruction on how the members of households were to conduct themselves. Peter's here is brief, but Paul has several in his letters and they are often lengthy. We'll take a quick look at Paul's to get a better understanding of these codes among the believers.

Household codes were common in the ancient world. They outlined duties and responsibilities for the management of one's private affairs. What is most striking about Paul's codes is that for every instruction Paul gives the wife or the children, he's got four instructions for the husband! Why? Because the greatest challenges posed by the Christian life fell on the husband.

In the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day, the male head of household was all-powerful, the *paterfamilias*, the head of the family. According to Roman law, the *paterfamilias* even had the power to decide whether new-born infants should live or die. For Paul to tell the *paterfamilias* that he is to love and cherish his wife and family as Christ loved and cherished the church – well, I bet that went down hard. Sacrificial love would not have been the *modus operandi* of most Greco-Roman husbands. Actually doing as Paul instructs would require the *paterfamilias* to set aside willingly all the privileges and prerogatives accorded him by Roman law and social norms.

Paul uses the word "submit" now and then in his codes, conjuring up words like "subordinate" and "sub-par." How do we handle Paul's instructions written to a world so different from our own? What would Paul say to husbands and wives today?

Unquestionably, Paul lived and wrote within a patriarchal world which often saw women as inferior. Further, the Greek word that Paul uses clearly implies a hierarchy of authority. But if this is all we hear, we miss Paul's dramatic reshaping of marriage relationships among the believers.

In his ministry, Paul does not seek to overthrow the social structures that dominated the ancient world. Paul never advocates the end of slavery. Slavery was a "given" in the ancient world. Likewise, Paul can't conceive of a world in which wives do not defer to their husbands. *But*, Paul does challenge these new Christians' beliefs about the proper exercise of authority and the meaning of power. Indeed, we see this in the responsibilities he gave to women in his ministry, such as to Phoebe and Priscilla.

Marriage is an example of how Paul understood the cross to have reshaped relationships within households. For Paul, husbands are to take the lead in the marriage and in the household, but their model for what this means is Jesus Christ. And for Paul to speak of Christ is to speak of the cross, of Jesus' loving sacrifice for others. Yes, Paul writes, husbands are to take the lead but there is never room for arrogance, bullying, or abuse. They are to love their wives sacrificially and faithfully, just as Jesus loves his people.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I make the point that tough times, stresses and anxieties, too often cause us to turn inward, away from family and friends. Do you agree? If so, why do you think this is? Wouldn't it be more logical that we'd reach out to others? What holds us back? What are some concrete ways you could encourage yourself to reach out to others in tough times? What are some ways you could encourage others to reach out to you?
2. Peter lifts up for us a passage from Psalm 134, including "do something good." I'm not sure that Peter really intended to remind the believers that helping others is a great way to get through hardships, but it is certainly excellent advice. Helping others takes our focus off our own troubles and provides genuine aid to those who need it. Do you agree with this perspective? Have you participated in a mission project lately or deliberately provided a service to others? What are some ways you could get started?
3. Passages such as today's really challenge us to stay engaged and strive to hear a message for us in our culture. We read the passages on wives, husbands, and slaves and are easily tempted to move on . . . quickly. How can we go about becoming better readers of such passages? What do you think God hopes we'd hear?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings we are taking a look at some passages that bear on this week's reading from 1 Peter.

<p>Monday, 1 Peter 3:18-3:7 The entire section from 1 Peter on living honorably in the household.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Peter 3:8-22 The believers are suffering. What is faithful suffering in the light of Christ?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Romans 13:1-7 Paul writes about the relationship of believers to their government.</p>	<p>Thursday, Titus 2 A bit of a household code, emphasizing doing good for others for the sake of the gospel.</p>
<p>Friday, Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9 One of Paul's household codes.</p>	<p>Saturday, Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus teaches his disciples that they are to be light to the world. They cannot stay hidden away.</p>

