**Marriage Core Seminar**

Class#4: Beauty in a Fallen World

**I. Introduction**

Good morning and welcome back to the marriage core seminar! You’ll remember that two weeks ago we looked at the basic orientations we have in marriage as husband and wife. Then last week he took us through Genesis 3 where we looked at the impact of sin on marriage. Today, we’re going to put these two together. What danger does sin pose to these God-honoring orientations of husband and wife, and how can a marriage thrive despite those pressures?

The passage we’ll be discussing is 1 Peter 3:1-7. Which, if you’ll ask my wife or anyone who’s done premarital counseling with me is in my view the great hidden gem on marriage in the Bible. So I’m excited to take you though it this morning. In many ways, I think this passage is as close as we have in Scripture to the secret to a good marriage.

The question I want us to answer this morning is the title of this class. “How can marriage be beautiful in a fallen world?” That is, beautiful to us—a sweet and satisfying marriage. And beautiful to God as a reflection of *his* beauty.

Let’s start by putting this passage in context. In this section of 1 Peter, Peter is describing categories of submission: citizens submitting to government (2:13-17); slaves obeying masters (2:18-25); wives following husbands (3:1-7). This is how, 1 Peter 2:12-13, we will keep our conduct “honorable” to win over for Christ those who would otherwise hate him. And note that in every case, this is submission to a sinful authority. The evil Roman government, the evil institution of slavery, and then in chapter 3, a Christian woman submitting to the leadership of her non-Christian husband. These passages tell us to trust the goodness of God’s perfect leadership so much that we will submit to imperfect human leadership. And when we do, the world will take notice.

Of course, the passage that’s our interest for today is the one on marriage—1 Peter 3:1-7. And our question: “how can marriage be beautiful in a fallen world?” Peter starts by describing beauty as a goal of marriage, and then he shows us how trust and honor are the means to get there. We’ll take each of those in turn.

**II. Beauty as the Goal**

Given the larger context of 1 Peter 3, we shouldn’t be surprised that Peter begins by talking about beauty. Remember, 1 Peter 2:12, his goal is for the unbelieving Gentiles, having seen the conduct of the Christians, will turn to Christ and glorify him when he returns. We’re to hold out something that’s beautiful and attractive. One of these unbelieving Gentiles is married to a Christian woman, and so Peter addresses her.

“Likewise” he begins in 3:1 – just like Christians show off God as trustworthy by submitting to an unrighteous government, just like Christian slaves do the same by obeying their unrighteous masters—"wives, be subject to your own husbands”—just like we saw last week in Ephesians 5. “So that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.”

Now, to understand what Peter’s saying, we need to begin by asking,

*A. What is true beauty?*

That’s where I think this gets fascinating. Peter doesn’t scold this woman for wanting to be beautiful. Not “stop worrying about your appearance, just focus on your character.” Instead, Peter gives the secret to real beauty. Fabulous hair or gold jewelry or great looking clothes? That’s child’s play, Peter says. Don’t mess around with that stuff; it won’t actually make you attractive. Instead, let me show you real beauty: the beauty of the hidden person of the heart. That’s what will make you attractive to your husband; that’s what will make Christ attractive through you.

We can all think of people who, by fashion magazine standards, have all the right ratios and figure to be considered beautiful. But because of vanity or bitterness or what have you, *no one* would call them beautiful. It’s not that you’d say they’re beautiful on the outside but not on the inside. It’s that they’re not beautiful, period. And if that’s true of people you know in passing, how much more so in marriage? True beauty is *seen* on the outside but it flows from the inside. Which means that true beauty shows off God’s work in the heart.

Yet there’s one aspect of her character in particular that Peter points to. A wife is beautiful to her husband especially in her posture toward *him*. She is to “submit” (verse 1) with a “gentle and quiet spirit” (verse 4). When he messes up, she doesn’t get self-protective and bent out of shape; she continues to seek his good. When the kids skip their nap and the squabbling hits a new low, a gentle and quiet spirit continues on, doing what is good, undismayed by the chaos. It’s the beauty of Jesus a few paragraphs earlier: “entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (2:23). Jesus so trusted in the perfect will of his heavenly father that he wasn’t disquieted or dismayed even when the terror of all hell came crashing down.

Ultimately then, her submission to her husband is simply the outflowing of her submission to God. When the storms of life rage around her it’s because this woman trusts *God* that she can live out the strength of a gentle and a quiet spirit. Of all the things Peter could have pointed us to—honesty, or compassion, or self-control—it is this peace of heart, evidenced in marital submission, that he says is true beauty. *This* beauty that shines from within, that’s evident from without, showcases the beauty and goodness of God.

And now that we understand beauty, we can understand

*B. Why beauty matters*

This woman wants her unbelieving husband to be attracted to Christ. And she’s Christ’s representative in his life. So her beauty, that comes from a heart that trusts God, testifies to the goodness of God. The more she trusts the goodness of God, the more she’ll be beautiful to her husband, and in God’s mercy, this man will see that. Just like we saw in chapter 2, verse 13.

Remember from week one that the goal of marriage is to *portray* the goodness of God. To you, to your spouse, to the people around you. That means that the purpose of marriage—even beyond the things it produces like companionship and children and ministry—is found in its beauty. Beauty that shows off the beauty of God.

This purpose of marriage, as a reflection of the beauty of God, was important in Genesis 2 before sin entered the world. It’s infinitely more important in 1 Peter 3 now that the world is stained with sin. Marriage is part of how the truth of God’s beauty will break into the darkness of this world’s lies about him. Whether you’re a woman or a man, whether you’re married to a Christian or an unbeliever, beauty is God’s goal for your marriage. Beauty that shows off *his* beauty, that portrays *his* goodness.

If you’re married then, this pursuit of beauty should dominate your marriage. Not the kind of beauty that Instagram lauds, but something more real, more lasting—“imperishable” as Peter calls it. Remember, he’s the one apostle who we know was married. He spoke from experience. Wives: seek to trust God so that your life embodies this “gentle and quiet spirit” that will show in your face. Husbands: seek to foster a marriage where your wife thrives in her trust in God and becomes more beautiful because of your good leadership.

If you’re not married, I hope these truths illustrate the proverb, “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised (Prov. 31:30).” *Real* beauty comes from character that’s shaped by trust in God, that points to him. Are you calibrating your taste in beauty to desire this imperishable beauty in yourself or in the one you’re looking to marry?

Of course, in a fallen world, there’s a significant obstacle to this beauty, which we see in verses 5-6. But before I go there, are there any questions?

**III. Fear as the Obstacle**

Let’s move onto verse 5. “For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.”

You see *fear* in that last sentence. “do not fear anything that is frightening.” Why would this woman fear? Because she’s chosen to submit herself to a sinful man, that’s why! That puts her in a vulnerable and frightening position.

Just like the example of Sarah that Peter mentions. At times, Abraham was a *terrible* husband. In Genesis 12, he was afraid of Pharoah so he sent Sarah in to sleep with Pharoah. Husbands: bad example to follow. And then in Genesis 20 he does the same thing again! Did Sarah have reason to fear as she followed her very flawed husband? You bet she did.

A woman faces different temptations toward fear in marriage than a man faces because of the differences in orientation that we saw two weeks ago, and the impact of sin on those differences like we saw last week. She fears that he’ll misuse his authority and she’ll get run over in the process. That can be as simple as his physical strength; that can be as nuanced as the way he makes decisions. Husbands and wives are foolish to pretend like they face the same temptations in marriage.

In fact, I’d say that in a fallen world, the basic shape of marriage that Mark talked about two weeks ago tilts toward fear for the wife. If neither she nor her husband push back against that temptation (which Peter will get to shortly), marriage will tend toward fear.

* Fear is often underneath the desire some wives have to control the relationship and their husbands. “I can’t trust him; I’ll need to take care of this myself.”
* Fear is often underneath a desire to create distance in the relationship. “I can’t trust him with my secrets so I’ll just keep that part of my life from him.”
* Fear is so often underneath anger. Anger is the right response to injustice, and it’s wrong for her to experience fear in this most intimate of relationships. Anger is often stewarded inappropriately, but the anger itself comes from something real, something righteous.

I’d go so far to say that most problems in marriage have at their root a wife’s fear because she’s vulnerable, because that’s a scary place to live. I’m not saying that the problems are her *fault*—quite the contrary very often, as we’ll see in a bit. But marital problems so often have a wife’s fear at their core.

Yet Sarah still followed and even respected Abraham, as Peter notes here[[1]](#footnote-1). Why? Because he was respect*able*? Hardly. No. It’s because—as verse 5 says—she “hoped in God. Which brings us to our next point:

**IV. A Wife’s Trust in God Resists Fear**

How can a wife resist this temptation toward fear? Especially *this* wife in 1 Peter 3 who’s submitting to a man who doesn’t respect God? By putting her hope and her trust in God. Her hope isn’t that her husband will always use his authority well. That would be naïve no matter who you’re married to, much less this man. No, her hope is that *God* has promised to use all things for her good, that *God* is control, and that *God* has told her to submit to this man unless such submission means disobeying him. Her husband may mess up but God will never mess up. And this is what God has called her to.

She doesn’t need to seize control. She doesn’t need to become self-protective. Because God has promised to use her husband’s selfishness, his inconsiderate words, his unfair criticism—for her good. Now, as we discussed last week this never means that she should submit to what is abusive or sinful. I won’t repeat what we talked about last week, but if you weren’t here please know we spent some time fleshing that out, which I’d be happy to discuss after class. Nonetheless, a wife’s submission to her husband isn’t grounded in his great leadership or his selflessness; he’s a sinner after all. Her reason for submitting isn’t grounded in *his* perfection but in *Christ’s* perfection. Thus that all-important word “hope” in the middle of verse five. *Hope* means good things are coming. Not just “you *should* submit to him.” But “I will use this for your good, and in that you can have *hope*.”

And what’s the result of this hope? It leads to courage. Look at the second half of verse six: “you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.” A Christian wife submits herself to *earthly* authority because of her trust in *God’s* authority. And then continues to do what is good, no matter what might frighten. *That* is real strength and courage. And *that* is real beauty.

For the woman of verses 1-6, this is where things end. She can be beautiful—and make her marriage a beautiful portrayal of the goodness of God—by putting her hope in God, resisting fear, and submitting to her husband. But then in verse 7 Peter turns to a different marriage, where the husband now is also a Christian. That’s because he also has great ability to push back against this fear that her vulnerability creates. But before we get there, are there *any* *questions*?

**V. A Husband’s Care Helps His Wife Resist Fear**

Verse 7. “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.”

What Peter describes is a relationship where men and women are different in their positions in the marriage, and equal in dignity and worth. Equality of worth is what he’s getting at in that phrase “heirs with you of the grace of life.” In sharp contrast to first century culture that debased women legally—and sadly, the way nearly every culture since has debased women in its own way—a Christian husband is to treat his wife as a fellow child of God.

They are equal in worth—yet different in position, which makes her *vulnerable*, as I mentioned earlier. That’s in part what Peter’s getting at with that phrase, “the weaker vessel.” How is she weaker? Most wives are physically weaker than their husbands, which makes them vulnerable. And in addition there’s the dynamic he’s just described in verses 1-6 where she is in a more vulnerable position by virtue of submitting to a sinful man. I would guess that both are in view here.

And how is the husband to treat her? With honor. Living with her in an understanding way. That phrase, “in an understanding way” is literally “according to knowledge.” Because of his knowledge of what God requires of him as a husband, he will live with her according to his knowledge of her. Thus the NIV translation “be considerate as you live with your wives.” Don’t just make good decisions; make decisions in such a way that she *feels* considered.

Now, I’m afraid that for too many husbands, “being considerate” feels like extra credit and not the core responsibility of marriage. “OK, so I could have been more considerate. But at least I was *trying* to be nice!” Which is why Peter’s last phrase of the verse is so powerful. The marriage relationship is inherently asymmetric. My wife has placed herself in a more vulnerable position in the relationship than I have. And so if I continue blithely on as if we’re just buddies and peers—without taking special care to honor the vulnerability she’s assumed, Peter has some very hard words for me at the end of verse 7. “that your prayers may not be hindered.” Look ahead to 3:12. “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” Whose prayers does God *not* listen to? Those who do evil. What is Peter saying about the inconsiderate husband? That he does evil. Men: not living with your wife in an understanding way isn’t a small thing. God hates it. And he will turn his face away from you for that kind of evil.

The wonderful thing about this, though, is how perfectly verses 6 and 7 fit together. The woman is tempted to fear—because she is submitting to a sinful man. So her job is to put her hope in God. But the man can help her, can’t he? He can help by understanding her, because understanding is the perfect antidote to fear.

I remember in the years I was in business before becoming a pastor, the business unit I led was our company’s “growth” business—which was a polite way of saying it didn’t fit with the rest. And one day the CEO came to my office to tell me he’d made a decision that made perfect sense for the rest of the company but would be difficult for us. And before the decision was announced, he wanted me to know that he’d given careful thought to its impact on us.

What a difference that conversation made! Without it, my team would’ve grumbled and raged “they say we’re the future of the company but all they ever do is tell us to make bricks without straw.” But knowing that our needs were understood and considered—even if they decided against us—well, we all get why that might happen. Exit anger, exit grumbling—instead of feeling invisible, we now feel cared for, even though we didn’t get our way.

How much more in marriage. You may disagree with your husband’s decision. But if it’s clear that he’s made it with a full understanding of your world, and how it will affect you—and if you know that he’s acting out of love—it’s a lot easier to move forward in a gentle and quiet spirit, rather than fighting for your interests.

So verses 6 and 7 work together. But the reverse is also true: this pattern explains much of the conflict in marriage. Let me give you an example from early in my marriage.

My wife Joan called me in the office during the afternoon to let me know that the power was out. I told her I hoped it would come back on soon, didn’t give it a second thought, and went on with my day as usual. Back at home chaos reigned. Our two little boys were out of control with excitement. There was no hot water, so bath time for the baby was an extra challenge. No power for cooking, so Joan had to figure out something different for dinner. And so forth. That was *her* world. Then I come waltzing home at my usual time, aware of the power outage not thinking anything of it. Of course, what was Joan hoping for? That I’d recognize how difficult things were and come home early. Now she’s frustrated with me. That particular day, she did an amazing job of holding her tongue. But you can easily imagine how things could go. She feels taken for granted. After all, whose job is it in Ephesians 6 to raise our kids? Mine, as their father. Who’s been with them all day? My wife—as my helper. Whose decision was it that we divide up our life that way? Mine, as the leader. So it is *so* easy for her to think, “he doesn’t care about me; all he’s looking for is someone to do the hard work for him.” Which might slip out as some of biting, critical comment. “How come you’re never home in time to help with dinner?”

I, meanwhile, am totally oblivious to this battle going on inside her. I’m just walking in the door, my loveable old self. And wham—I’m met with a completely unprovoked, unjustified—and un*true* critique. Not wanting my wife to overreact, I’m careful to correct her. “Dear—remember, I helped make dinner 13 days ago. Never say never.” Which, of course, comes across as completely defensive—which further convinces her that she’s right. That I don’t care, that I’m taking advantage of her. And since I’m not getting it, she lobs an even more forceful critique, which I parry just as forcefully—now simply assuming she’s had a bad day and she’s taking it out on poor innocent me.

So who started this conflict? I did. By being inconsiderate and clueless. Which fed into her fear. She responded to fear by being self-protective, which meant going on the offensive. And I responded to that by being self-protective myself, which meant getting defensive. Which further deepened her fear and feeling of vulnerability. And so we spiral downward.

So what should she have done in this hypothetical situation (and did do in the real situation)? Aim her hope not at me but at God. Fight the temptation toward fear by trusting in his perfect plans for her. And what should I have done? Well, for starters—I could have clued in to what was going on in her world when she first called. But failing that, the moment I hear that tense, biting tone in her voice, I should be thinking, “what did I do or didn’t do or say or didn’t say that’s making her feel like I am not *for* her, that I’m taking her for granted?” And then hear her critique not as an argument to be corrected, but as an opportunity to begin listening to what she’s experiencing, so that I can start leading out of understanding.

So you have this asymmetric relationship that in a fallen world that tilts toward fear. As a husband, your job—your calling from God himself—is to constantly seek to push back in the other direction. And you do that with the two tools Peter describes here: by understanding her world (and making her *feel* understood) and by honoring her for what she’s done. Making her feel cherished. Understanding and honor. This means that *both* husband and wife will feel like marriage is unfair. She’s feeling it’s unfair because of the vulnerable place she’s in. And she sacrifices in ways he doesn’t because she’s taken on the position of helpmate. He’s feeling its unfair because he’s called to pursue her in ways she doesn’t pursue him, sacrificing in ways she doesn’t because it takes sacrifice to make her feel understood and cherished.

So men: here’s how you make marriage beautiful in a fallen world. You make vulnerability feel safe. Make vulnerability feel safe. Like a slogan for your marriage. “The Smith family: making vulnerability safe since 2001.” The Logans: “40 years of making vulnerability safe.”

And why do I describe this as beautiful? Because it’s vulnerability, held in trust, that makes a marriage so sweet and intimate. It’s what makes a marriage different than any other relationship you’ll ever have. If a wife gives in to fear and flees the vulnerable position Scripture describes, or if the husband doesn’t make that position feel safe, honored, and cherished, marriage loses its sweetness and it loses its beauty. It loses what makes it special for us, and it compromises what it shows off about God.

*Any questions?*

**VI. Conclusion**

Let me close with how exquisitely these ideas fit together. As a wife trusts God, and as a husband tenderly cares for her out of his own trust in God, they will together make vulnerability feel safe—and in that there is a satisfaction, a joy, a sweetness that they will not experience in any other human relationship. “Naked and not ashamed,” you might say. And do you see that this is the very thing that fulfills the God-given purpose of their marriage? That same beauty of the relationship that they experience is showing off the beauty of God. The God who designed their relationship. The God whose goodness they trust in the relationship. Sweetness, beauty, and the glory of God all come together. The thing everyone wants—a sweet and intimate and safe marriage—comes as *God’s* purposes for their marriage are fulfilled, to reveal him as good and delightful so that he can be enjoyed as good and delightful. “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

1. The phrase “calling him lord” comes from an episode in Genesis 18 when God says he’s going to give Abraham and Sarah a child. Sarah laughs at the idea. “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” God asks if she laughed and she denies it. Not a good moment for Sarah: doubting God and then lying to his face, all in a single conversation. And yet even at that lowest point of her faith, Peter notices that she still calls Abraham “lord.” Even at this low point this is the level of respect that she has for her husband. And Peter says such respect could only come from a woman who had put her hope in God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)