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MINISTRIES

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Life in Exile: Behaving Honorably Among the Gentiles (1 Peter 2:11-3:7)

Welcome back to our study through 1 Peter. Today we’re going to cover 1 Peter 2:11-3:7. In this section, Peter tells his readers to live honorably among the Gentiles. Then, he goes on to explain what that means, specifically in the relationship between believers and civic authorities, between servants and masters, and between wives and husbands.

But before we get started, here’s a quick summary of what we discussed last time:

1. Those who have been genuinely born again into God’s family will desire God’s word. If you’ve experienced the Lord’s goodness, you will want to experience more. Your longing for God’s word should be like that of an infant longing for his mother’s milk (1 Peter 2:1-3).
2. Our response to the Messiah, whom Peter calls the living “stone,” sets us on a path that will lead to either eternal salvation or eternal punishment. God has chosen honor and salvation for the believer and punishment for the unbeliever. Contrary to some readings, Peter does not say that God predestines some to unbelief. Rather, God predestined *the punishment* for unbelief. By stumbling over the stone—that is, rejecting the word—unbelievers have set their fate for eternity.
3. Peter applies Old Testament descriptions of Israel to his predominantly Gentile audience on purpose. Through Messiah, Gentile believers have become full members of God’s family. Peter even identifies the faithful Gentiles coming to the Lord as the fulfillment of Hosea’s prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel.

After reaffirming that his readers are part of God’s family—members of the community of Israel—Peter now instructs them on how they are to live as exiles within the world. Let’s take a look:

1 Peter 2:11-12

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Since Peter's readers have a new identity in the Messiah (1 Peter 2:4-10), which causes them to live differently (1 Peter 1:13-16), the broader culture in which they live excludes and slanders them. Peter's readers are "[sojourners and exiles](#)" in the world because they are members of God's kingdom, which transcends the world.

However, they must still function within earthly society. Peter tells them that they are to live honorably among the Gentiles. When he uses the word "Gentiles" here, Peter is not referring to non-Jews but rather to unbelievers. "Gentiles" can simply mean non-Jewish people, including non-Jews who follow the Messiah. But throughout 1 Peter, the word means unbelievers or pagans. Paul sometimes uses this term in the same way:

Ephesians 4:17-18

[Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.](#)

So, Peter says that believers must live honorably among the unbelievers. Why? So that they "[may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.](#)" Believers are to be good witnesses in the world for Messiah. Therefore, they must "[abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul](#)" (1 Peter 2:11).

In other words, believers are not to conform to the passions of their former ignorance (1 Peter 1:14)—the sinful way they lived before they received the gospel. The pursuit of holiness now replaces those fleshly passions. As Paul teaches, Yeshua's work of redemption enables us to fulfill "[the righteous requirement of the law](#)" because we walk "[not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit](#)" (Romans 8:4).

Another reason that Peter instructs his readers to live honorably among the Gentiles is so that they can refute slanderous accusations (1 Peter 3:16). Believers were often spoken against and called "evildoers." Why? Well, one of the biggest complaints against followers of Yeshua, as well as broader Judaism at the time, was that their beliefs and lifestyle were a threat to the public order and cultural expectations. These concerns are why Peter gives the instructions he does in 1 Peter 2:13-3:7. He instructs believers to submit to earthly authorities (2:13-14), servants to submit to masters (2:18-25), and wives to submit to their unbelieving husbands (3:1-6). These instructions are part of what are known as "household codes," which were cultural standards for honorable relations between family and society members. It was important to adhere to these common ethical codes to be considered good citizens in ancient culture.

As Craig Keener writes:

Jewish people living in the Diaspora (1:1) always had to be concerned about Gentiles' anti-Jewish slanders, for their safety and for their witness to the one true God. Just as Gentiles were more than happy to slander Jews living among them, they were happy to slander Gentile converts to what they viewed as a Jewish sect, Christianity (2:4-10). The behavior advocated in the following household codes (2:13–3:12) would undermine some of the most traditional slanders against such faiths, **slanders that they subverted the public order and traditional family values** [...] Many ancient household codes were set in the context of discussions of city management and included instructions on how to behave toward the state (as well as toward parents, elders, friends, members of one's household, etc.). According to contemporary aristocratic ideals, the household mirrored the government of a city-state, so public obligations

and obligations within the household (2:18– 3:7) were commonly treated together. Stoic and other philosophers commonly used these ethical codes to delineate proper relationships with others. **Jewish people and members of other slandered religious groups sometimes adopted these codes to demonstrate that their groups actually supported the values of Roman society; this demonstration was important in combating persecution.**

-Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), p. 690

While believers are to be holy and not compromise their biblical convictions, they still should respect human institutions and cultural norms so as to not harm their witness. Peter adopts these common ethical codes, with some slight alterations, in hopes that his readers' good conduct will silence their critics and put to shame those who accuse them (1 Peter 2:15; 3:16).

Yeshua expressed a similar attitude regarding the believers' place in the broader secular culture. He said, “**Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's**” (Mark 12:17). Instead of violently revolting *against* the world, or compromising *with* the world, the Messiah and Peter give a third option: exist in the tension between faithfully obeying God and being a good citizen in an ungodly society. This is certainly not the easiest path to navigate, but it's the path that has the potential to yield the most fruit within the larger secular world in which God's elect exiles find themselves.

Let's continue:

1 Peter 2:13-17

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

As believers, we do not behave like the world. We have been called out of darkness and into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). We are to be holy (1 Peter 1:13-16), and this will sometimes put us into conflict with the world. However, we must not *unnecessarily* offend or stir up trouble.

One way we live honorably among the Gentiles is by submitting to “**every human institution**”—that is, all kinds of human authority figures, including those in secular government, like the emperor and governors. By their love and humility, believers shine the Messiah's light in their relationship to human authority figures.

If we were to apply these principles to our modern context in America, the “supreme” authority could be seen as the federal government, and “governors” could be seen as local authorities, such as local lawmakers and police officers. In accordance with Peter's teaching, we must seek to be good citizens and honor these human authorities as best as we can.

We do this “**for the Lord's sake**.” That is, to be good witnesses for the Lord. Peter says, “**For this is the will of God**”—this is how God expects his people to behave as they live under these civil authorities. The fact that our submission to human authorities is “**for the Lord's sake**” also makes it clear that even though we obey the civil authorities when we can, we always obey God first. As Paul Achtemeier explains:

That phrase also qualifies subordination by placing it within the larger context of obedience to God; one is not to be subordinate in matters that go counter to God's will.

-Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 182

Another motivation for the believers' submission to human authorities is so that they could "[put to silence the ignorance of foolish people](#)." By "[doing good](#)," believers refuted slanderous claims against them. This was important because slander often led to legal trouble and invited even worse persecution from civil authorities. Living by the "household codes" of the broader culture was a type of "apologetic," or defense, to silence criticism.

Now, while believers should try to avoid causing offense, Peter recognizes that this isn't always possible. In many ways, Christian morality is in harmony with what the broader society considers "good." Thus, living in accordance with God's ways goes hand in hand with being a good citizen.

However, there are also areas where Christian morality significantly differs from the secular culture. In those cases, believers must suffer for righteousness' sake and for doing God's will (1 Peter 3:14, 17; 4:3-4). Rather than a way to avoid being maligned, oftentimes, our faithfulness to God's ways is *the very reason* that we are being maligned. Once again, as exiles, believers exist in this tension between faithfully obeying God and being a good citizen in an ungodly society. Sometimes faithfulness to God *requires* us to be in conflict with society and endure persecution for our faith. For example, we might consider the story in Exodus 1:15-17. The king of Egypt ordered that the Hebrew midwives kill the sons born to the Hebrew women they served. Defying this order could have cost the midwives their lives but following the order would have been a grave offense against God. Since they obeyed God first above all, they could not submit to this government decree. Wisdom is learning how to navigate this path of when to submit to secular authorities and when to resist.

Peter goes on to say, "[Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God](#)." According to Peter, believers are free in the Messiah from the jurisdiction of earthly authorities because they're citizens of a higher kingdom that transcends this world. Earthly authorities do not determine their purpose and destiny. However, we must not use our freedom from these earthly authorities as an excuse to behave dishonorably. To use this freedom from authorities as an excuse to dishonor and rebel against them unnecessarily would be using it as a cover for evil. Instead, we submit to earthly authorities out of service to God, our true authority. We as believers are servants of God, and serving God comes with responsibilities to honor everyone, love fellow believers, fear God, and honor the emperor. "[For this is the will of God](#)." But once again, since God is our ultimate authority, he, not any human authority, must be given our ultimate submission.

Let's continue:

1 Peter 2:18-25

[Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued](#)

entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

This passage is the next section of Peter's "household code." The relationship between slaves and masters is another example of submission to human authority (1 Peter 2:13). Once again, Peter instructs his readers to adhere to society's standards of behavior in accordance with these ethical codes so that they can refute the slanders against them and be a light to those around them.

Whether their master is gentle or unjust, Peter tells slaves to submit to their masters with all respect. If their master is unjust, they might even have to endure beatings and other types of abuse. Peter encourages them that suffering for doing good is gracious in God's sight. He goes on to give Yeshua the Messiah as the example of honorable behavior in the midst of unjust suffering.

Often, modern readers are troubled by the New Testament's instructions regarding master-slave relationships. To be clear, Peter does not endorse the institution of slavery by commenting on it. Slavery was simply the reality at the time, and believers had to do their best to navigate this less-than-ideal situation. Abolition wouldn't have been possible at this time, even though biblical teachings on human equality undermined slavery in principle and inspired the Christian abolitionists in later times to bring an end to slavery. Nevertheless, in light of his desire for his readers to be good witnesses in society, Peter's pragmatic approach was to encourage believers who were slaves on how to handle the situation in the best way for God's glory.

It's also important to keep in mind that the Bible does not demand that things like slavery be reinstalled in our modern context. While the principles of Peter's teaching transcend culture and are relevant for all times, the cultural framework in which these principles were given initially is not expected to be carried forward into our modern times.

Craig Keener puts this point well:

The eschatological people of God must still function within society, morally distinct but socially honorable. The instructions regarding subjects of kings (2:13), slaves (2:18-25), and wives of nonbelievers (3:1-6) do not mandate maintaining monarchy, slavery, or patriarchal forms of marriage in all societies. (Indeed, attempts to resurrect those structures against current social paradigms would undercut the attempts at peace with society for which these instructions were designed.) These are *human* institutions (2:13), and Peter himself recognizes that they may act unjustly (2:19). They do illustrate the principle of honoring social roles where possible for the sake of Christian witness (2:12-13).

-Craig Keener, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2021), 146

Peter ends this chapter by encouraging his readers to follow Yeshua's example. Yeshua suffered unjustly, just like many of his followers suffer unjustly. And yet, he did not return evil for evil. He continued "entrusting himself to him who judges justly." In the same way, when we suffer unjustly, we too must trust in God and recognize that he's the ultimate authority. And just like Yeshua was raised from the dead, we too will be vindicated in the world to come.

Peter concludes chapter 2 by affirming Yeshua as our Savior, Shepherd, and Overseer. He has redeemed and healed us by his work on the tree; he leads, protects, and instructs us in the way of righteousness.

Let's continue:

1 Peter 3:1-7

Likewise, wives, 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, 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. 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. 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.

This passage is the final part of Peter's "household code." This section concerns the relationship between husbands and wives. Wives are to submit to their own husbands "**even if some do not obey the word**"—that is, even if her husband is an unbeliever. According to Achtemeier:

While the phrase καὶ ἢ τινες ("even if some") implies that not all husbands of Christian wives are nonbelievers, it is clear that the verse is directed to those Christian wives for whom that is in fact the case: the interrogative particle ἢ states a fact here, not a hypothetical possibility.

-Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 209

Once again, there is an apologetic motivation behind this instruction. The goal is that her husband "**may be won without a word**" when he sees his wife's "**respectful and pure conduct**."

This is another clear picture of believers existing in the tension between allegiance to the Messiah and honorable behavior within an ungodly society—a tension that is sometimes present even in the family! In ancient Greco-Roman culture, the wife was not only expected to submit to her husband but also expected to adopt her husband's religion. Since the Christian wife could not do that, she had to find a way to maintain peace in the family as best as she could and hopefully inspire her husband to adopt *her* faith. Achtemeier writes:

[T]he household, like the republic, expressed its solidarity in a common religion, and unwillingness to share such solidarity was perceived as a threat to the state as well as to the family. It was the Christian wives' necessary insubordination in the matter of sharing the unbelieving husband's religion that led to the problem addressed in these verses [...] in the context of this letter, the wife's ultimate submission, and thus responsibility, is to Jesus as her Lord, and that ultimate submission means that the submission to her husband is secondary, and is to take the form of living out her faith so transparently that her unbelieving husband may be won to the faith.

-Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 211

Peter goes on to say, "**Do not let your adorning be external**," and then gives the examples of hairstyles, jewelry, and clothing. Once again, this exhortation lines up with cultural sentiments and would have served an apologetic function. As Keener writes:

Hair was braided in elaborate manners, and well-to-do women strove to keep up with the latest expensive fashions. The gaudy adornments of women of wealth, meant to draw attention to themselves, were repeatedly condemned in ancient literature and speeches, and Peter's hearers would assume that his point was meant in the same way (challenging excess, not clothing per se).

-Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), p. 692

Instead of outward adorning, Christian wives must “let [their] adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.” Again, according to Keener:

Ancients considered a meek and quiet spirit a prime virtue for women, and many moralists advised this attitude instead of dressing in the latest fashions to attract men's attention.

-Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), p. 692

Again, the purpose of abiding by this “household code” was not only to silence critics but also to be a light to the Gentiles. Peter advises his female readers who are married to unbelieving husbands to live honorably in hopes that their husbands would be “won” by their humble and gentle behavior.

Peter gives the “holy women” as the example for these wives to follow. As his mention of Sarah indicates, Peter is probably referring to the matriarchs of Israel here: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. These women “[hoped in God](#),” submitted to their husbands, and exhibited humility, gentleness, and respect. Peter calls on Christian wives to similarly hope in God as they try to win their husbands to the Lord by their respectful and pure conduct. He concludes his instructions to these wives by reminding them of their identity as part of the family of Israel through Messiah: “[And you are \[Sarah's\] children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening](#).” These women are instructed not to live in fear but to trust in the ultimate authority.

Peter ends this section with a brief exhortation to husbands. Unlike his instruction to wives, Peter assumes that these husbands are married to believers. This makes sense seeing as how the wife in this culture was expected to adopt her husband's religion, so a believing husband being married to an unbelieving wife would have been rare.

Peter tells husbands to “[live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel](#).” The assumption that women were “weaker” than men in terms of intellect, morality, physical strength, and spirituality, was common in ancient Greco-Roman society. The first-century Roman historian Tacitus criticizes women as lacking self-control and being easily manipulated due to their female nature. He blames wives for corrupting their husbands with their vices (Tacitus, *Annals* 3:34). Obviously, Peter does not share the cultural assumption that women are by nature morally and intellectually inferior, as verses 1-2 indicate. Peter probably has in mind that women are generally physically weaker than men and have a lower social position. Thus, according to biblical morality, which emphasizes showing special consideration toward those in “weaker” positions socially and physically, Peter instructs husbands to show special consideration toward their wives.

Additionally, despite the lower worth that women held in the eyes of the broader culture, Peter instructs husbands to honor their wives and consider them fellow heirs of the grace of life. This is an example of resistance to the broader cultural sentiments. As Achtemeier writes:

The description of the women as coheirs of the grace of life forms a grammatical parallel to their description as weaker vessels and gives further reason for men not to adopt the normal cultural attitude toward them, since in God's eyes, as heirs of grace, men and women stand on the same level.

-Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 218

According to Peter, the conduct of Christian husbands toward their wives is so important that the husband's prayers are hindered if he fails to honor his wife! God opens his ears to the prayers of the righteous but turns his face against those who do evil (1 Peter 3:12; cf. Psalm 34:15-16). Rather than buy into the cultural sentiments about female inferiority, husbands have a responsibility to treat their wives as fellow heirs in the faith.

Let's talk more about behaving honorably among the gentiles.

Behaving Honorably Among the Gentiles

The consistent message throughout 1 Peter is that we are to live holy lives and rejoice despite suffering. After all, we have hope that God will set all things right in the end. We don't need to worry about the outcome—God will take care of the outcome. We just do what we're supposed to do. We behave honorably in whatever situation we find ourselves in.

The prophet Jeremiah gave the Jewish exiles living in Babylon similar instructions. He basically told them to make the best of their less-than-ideal situation. He told them to plant roots, live life, and even seek the welfare of the cities where they were scattered. That was the word of YHWH to these exiles:

Jeremiah 29:4-7

Thus says the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD [YHWH] on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

The calling of the exile is to be a light wherever God has placed you. According to Jeremiah, this means building a home—planting roots in the community. It means growing gardens and eating the produce—that is, seeking to prosper economically. It means getting married and having children and grandchildren, raising them up in the knowledge of the Lord.

Living as God's elect exiles also means to "[seek the welfare of the city](#)." We should invest in our local communities. If we can influence leadership and lawmakers, we should take that opportunity. That might mean voting. That might mean campaigning for certain causes that are in alignment with Christian values. That might mean participating in other types of community outreach projects. Too many believers want to just tell the world to go to Hell and then hide out in a bunker until Messiah returns.

However, Yeshua said not to hide your light. We should try to serve our local communities and make them better.

I'm reminded of the Christian evangelicals in the 18th century who were directly responsible for abolishing the slave trade in England. Evangelicals led by William Wilberforce secured petitions, they gave lectures, and published abolitionist literature to fan the flames of public opposition to slavery. Their efforts raised enough public support that they were able to pressure the government to pass legislation to put a stop to the slave trade. Today, in the same way, God continues to use faithful believers to bring about justice and righteousness in the world in various ways. Believers continue to fight for righteous causes. We continue to fight against injustices like abortion and sex trafficking, and in many ways, we continue to be successful by God's grace. It's hard to deny the fact that the world is a much better place because of faithful Christians.

At the same time, we have no utopian delusions. We recognize that things will never be perfect in Babylon. It's a broken system because the entire world is fallen due to sin. No president that we elect will be able to fix it. No legislation that we pass will transform Babylon into the New Jerusalem.

While we do our best to have a positive impact in the world for God's glory, this world is not our true home. Only when Yeshua returns and establishes his kingdom in the world to come will things be perfect. We look forward to that time, and in the meantime, we live honorably among the Gentiles as best as we can.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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