

Christians for Biblical Equality
Workshop: 1 Peter 2:11-3:7
Rev. Matt Williams

Sandy was in a bit of a quandary.

She didn't know what to do.

Her boyfriend had asked her to marry him.
She was proud to be his girlfriend
– he was a very handsome man -
but she had several concerns.

She had noticed him being mean to others,
particularly his own mother.
She felt like he never really listened to her,
nor took into account what she would like to do.
He also had a tendency to get angry easily,
and that frightened her.

Sandy was sitting in a café pondering this,
when she overheard a conversation.

A mother was giving her daughter advice.

“Darling, he's a good man.
You're too fussy.
Good men don't grow on trees.
It's really silly to let those little things bother you.
You have faults too.
I really think you should take him.”

Sandy was shaken out of her complacency.
She decided to follow that mother's advice,
to stop quibbling about little things,
and she accepted her boyfriend's proposal.

But the thing is,
Sandy didn't know that mother or daughter.

She didn't know what their situation was.

In fact, that mother was advising a daughter who was fretting
that her boyfriend's second toe was longer than the first,
and that his ears stuck out too much,
and he wasn't quite as tall as she would like.

That mother had a principle:
that a man's character matters more than his looks,
and so since her daughter was overplaying his looks,
she advised her to marry him.

But if Sandy had sat down with that girl's mother
and told her what her own concerns were,
about her boyfriend's character and thoughtlessness,
she would have received very different advice.
She would have been told *not* to marry him,
for the same reason,
because a man's character matters more than his looks.

You see, advice on how we should act
is determined by two things:
firstly, the principles on which we act,
and secondly, the particulars of the situation we are in.

When you're eavesdropping on someone else's relationship,
you don't always hear everything they have said to each other,
you may not get all the context.

And if you apply their words directly,
as though there were no difference
between their situation and yours,
you are liable to get things very wrong,
even completely back to front.

I hope this is obvious.

Yet it seems to be a principle too often missing in action
when people apply the bible.

When we read the letters of the New Testament,
we are, in a sense, eavesdropping.

We are eavesdropping on the advice given by apostles of Jesus
to people in a particular place, time and situation,
to first century people of Middle Eastern or Mediterranean origin.

So we need to tread carefully,
when reading specific advice on conduct
from the pages of the bible.

These might seem like the most practical bits,
the most direct bits,
the easiest to apply.

But actually, they're the more complex bits
to read correctly.

With that said, we approach today's reading
from Peter's epistle with care.

And if you're wondering where I'm going,
I'm going to make this case:
Most of the commands
from our 1 Peter reading today
should not be unequivocally adopted
by a person living in 21st Century Australia.

And yet they are not irrelevant.
Far from it. They have a lot to teach us
about the calling of Jesus on our lives, even today.

So I hope, while using 1 Peter as an example,
to help you think about wider principles
for reading and applying scripture.

Come back to the text with me
as we unpack them a bit.

This whole section is working out some principles presented up front.

Look with me from verse 11:

¹¹*Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles
to abstain from the desires of the flesh
that wage war against the soul.*

¹²*Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles,
so that, though they malign you as evildoers,
they may see your honourable deeds
and glorify God when he comes to judge.*

¹³*For the Lord's sake accept the authority
of every human institution...*

Peter's audience is almost certainly Gentile Christians,
but he addresses them metaphorically
as now "Israelites in exile".

They are God's chosen people,
living amongst pagans.

So their situation is like that
of Judah in exile in Babylon and Persia;
think Daniel, Ezekiel, Esther.

So when Peter speaks of "Gentiles"
he means not the Gentile Christians
but 'unbelievers'.

*"I urge you as aliens and exiles...
Conduct yourselves honourably among the Unbelievers".*

This honourable conduct is firstly about
respecting the various authorities over them
authorities embedded in various human institutions.

They are not called to be revolutionaries,
violently overthrowing the emperor or governors;
Christian slaves are not called to be self-liberators,
running away from their masters;
Christian wives are not called to be feminists,
flaunting their newly discovered equality in Christ
before their unbelieving husbands
as an excuse to defy their authority.

They are told to accept these authorities as they exist,
not just for their own sake
but for the Lord's sake.

In other words, they are to accept them
because Jesus accepted them,
submitting to all human authorities over him.
He commended the payment of taxes to Caesar
instead of the seditious tax-evasion of nationalist Jews;
for as we see in his words to Pontius Pilate at his trial
he knew that even the authority of Pontius Pilate over him
was, in some sense, given from above.
Even his promised kingship didn't change this present reality.
To oppose it from below was to oppose God,
to exalt yourself was to forfeit the exaltation of God.

And so this becomes a defining mark of Christians too,
not seditious,
not power grabbers,
not self-liberators,
but respecters of the authority of every human institution.

But someone will say, what if they're bad rulers?

What if the emperor is persecuting Christians;
what if the master is beating his slave;
what if the husband is oppressing his wife?

Shouldn't I then lead a revolution,
or plan an escape?

My gut instinct says you should, doesn't yours?

Peter imagines a very different possibility.

He knows many of his readers will themselves in powerless situations
where the person above you is abusing them unfairly.
And instead of urging resistance,
he perceives an opportunity to be like Jesus,
to make their lives a retelling of part of the gospel story.

So he isn't just asking Christian slaves to submit to kind masters,
but also to those who are harsh.
He isn't just asking Christian wives to submit to godly husbands,
but even to those who disobey the word.

That's very confronting, isn't it?
What would be the point of that?

Verse 21:

²¹ *For to this you have been called,
because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example,
so that you should follow in his steps.*

²² *'He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.'*

²³ *When he was abused, he did not return abuse;
when he suffered, he did not threaten;
but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.*

We are liable to think of good conduct
in terms of rules, or laws,
do this, don't do this.

But Peter, and indeed Paul and Jesus,
describe their main ethics in terms of *story*.

The shape of the Christian life is not firstly
about do's and don'ts,
but about looking for opportunities
to embody something of the story of Jesus.

If anyone wants to be my disciple, Jesus said,
they must deny themselves, take up their cross,
and follow me.

"For to this you have been called, Peter said,
because Christ also suffered for you,
leaving you an example,
so that you should follow in his steps."

So should we apply this directly then,
to our lives in 21st Century Australia?

If persecuted by the Australian government;
should we simply submit without a word?

If oppressed by our employer,
or abused by our manager,
should we simply submit without a protest?

If domineered by your husband,
should you simply submit to his abuse?

No, No, and No.

Why not?

Because of verse 7.

These three relationships, as experienced by Peter's first readers,
had something in common:

they were all contexts where a believer
would find themselves answerable to an unbeliever
with absolute authority over them.

And I mean, *absolute* authority, with no recourse.

Peter seems to assume his audience
is almost all in these categories.

He doesn't even address masters of slaves,
and certainly not governors and emperors.

But then in verse 7

we find the one address to a party
who holds the reins,
one word to a party with power,
the first century husband
whose wife was virtually without rights before him.

The Christian husband is simply told:

⁷*Husbands, in the same way,
show consideration for your wives in your life together,
paying honour 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.*

She is to call him her “lord” or “master”
because he is her Lord or Master,
according to the human institution;
according to the social construction around marriage at the time;
but his response is to honour her
despite her weak position before him,
because he knows her true position before Jesus.

And her position before Jesus is not like her earthly position,
with no rights to inherit,
she is his co-heir of everything in Christ.

So although she must not get a false reputation for Christ
as one who overthrows human authorities
he also must not get a reputation for Christ
as one who lords it over
or exploits those who are vulnerable to him.

Neither activity would retell the gospel story.

If he knows the power she is promised,
he must treat her accordingly.

I was visiting a church on Sydney's North Shore
about a dozen years ago
when the preacher decided to launch a guilt trip on us.

He quoted Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2:
"I want men everywhere to pray,
lifting up holy hands in prayer
without quarrelling or argument."

He had found us sorely deficient in this regard,
in need of urgent rebuke.
It was not that we weren't praying,
not that our hands weren't holy,
not that we were quarrelling or arguing.
On none of these matters did he criticize us.

Our fault was the position of our hands,
which were in our laps, or by our sides.

And so for this gross sin we were shamed,
for the good of our souls,
as he summed up rather passionately:
"Don't tell me you're a bible-believing Christian
unless you lift your hands in the air when you pray."

Now Jewish men did lift their hands in the air to pray,
and there is nothing wrong with doing so,
indeed I always do so
when leading prayers around the Lord's Table.

But this is the assumption in the text,
that people lift their arms when they pray,
not a key ethical point.

The saddest thing was,
he was effectively picking a quarrel with us,
over the position of our hands during prayer,
when Paul's main concern
is that our prayers be united in holiness
and not disintegrate into squabbling
over things that didn't matter.

It was the preacher's attempt to be faithful to the text
that actually saw him be unfaithful to it.

And this is how I see it
when men try to compel their wives
to submit to their authority
in the name of passages like today's reading.

We don't actually have the legal and social authority
of a first century Middle-Eastern husband;
so it is silly and dysfunctional to pretend that we do.

And the call of the gospel even on those husbands then
was to be mindful only of their wives' equality,
compensating for their weak position,
not exacerbating it.

So when society has finally given them that equality even now;
how foolish, and how unfaithful,
to be trying to undermine it again.

We should first be considering
where the real power lies in our marriages,
the real capacity to honour ourselves or each other
and the real capacity to shame ourselves or each other.
It may not be where you think.

The equality we now enjoy before the law
in terms of inheritance and property etc.
does not mean that power distributions have been truly equalized,
but that they now depend more on gift than on gender.

My wife earns a lot more money than I do.
This is a genuine power she brings to our marriage,
an area in which I am weak and she is strong.
So in this area, she is called to be especially careful
not to dishonor me or shame me in my weakness,
but rather to pay honour to me as the weaker partner.

You might be substantially more intelligent than your partner,
and this is a genuine power in your marriage.
So again, you must be especially careful
not to simply run it around your partner in debates,
leaving them outsmarted and confused,
but use your intelligence to draw out
and help them articulate their hopes and desires in your marriage.

And I hope you can think of many other examples.

And I think this principle would spill back
into the other categories,
were Peter to address masters of slaves;
or governors of citizens.

Christian Governors and Masters should have known
that their subjects and slaves are also co-heirs with them,
every bit their equal before God,
and treated them accordingly.

Now over the past few hundred years,
western societies have been figuring out
how to redistribute real power,
to put in checks and balances
so the justice of our society might depend less
on the Christian character of those who get power.

We have introduced democracy,
so the power of government is limited
and accountable back to the people they govern.

We have abolished slavery,
so that everyone should have options
to remove themselves from abusive and dehumanizing situations.

And we have equalized legal entitlements and standing in marriage,
so that those whose marriages are abusive
are not trapped in them.

And these powers should be regarded by you
as an opportunity
a chance to live out another part of the Jesus story,
and bring justice to the oppressed,
liberty to the captives,
all of us can be a part of creating a culture
that does not tolerate abusive marriages
or abusive managers
or corrupt governors.

Our ancestors have sought to give each and every citizen
the levers to say 'no' to corruption and violence,
standing up to it not just for ourselves
but the protection of others.

Our society, inspired by the equality Jesus has guaranteed for our future,
has asked us to use those levers
for the good of the whole culture.

And perhaps if we do this,
our culture may be ever so slightly better shaped
in anticipation of the kingdom Jesus is bringing in.

That said, I hope we've learned two main things,
important things,
from our text today.

Firstly, honour people for whatever authority they do hold.
Praise God, that authority is more circumscribed in 21st Century Australia
than it was in 1st Century Turkey;
with more checks and balances and redistributions,
but there is still some authority there,
and you should honour it for the Lord's sake,
because the Lord Jesus honoured it too.

Secondly, your mission as a Christian
is to embody the story of Jesus, in whatever way you can.
There are many ways to do this,
sometimes several options in a given situation.

But the really great news from today's passage is this:
there is no situation, however hopeless or powerless you are,
however browbeaten and victimized you may be,
there is no situation in life
in which you cannot embody some part of that gospel story,
because you can always, at least,
not return abuse when abused,
you can always not threaten when you suffer,
and you can always put your trust
in the just judgement of God.

Discussions

Talk with your neighbor for a few minutes.

What are your reactions to this way of reading the bible?

What questions do you have?

What concerns do you have?

Open up a discussion about it together.

Talk to your neighbor for a few minutes.

Name how power is genuinely distributed in:

Australian politics.

Australian employee/employer relationships.

Australian marriages.

How is the power of giftedness distributed

in your marriage in particular,

or in the marriages of someone you have observed closely?

What would today's passage say to you or them

about how to use that power?