

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)

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May 10, 2020 (Mother's Day)

A Woman's Hope

1 Peter 3:1-12 (NIV)

3 Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. 3 Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. 4 Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. 5 For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, 6 like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

8 Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. 9 Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. 10 For,

"Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. 11 They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. 12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

[Slide 1] Opening

Good morning church! [*Mother's Day mini-movies??*]

This morning we're making a slight shift in honor of Mother's Day. We're not shifting away from our focus on hope—we're continuing to look at what it means to have a biblical hope, a "*resurrection hope*," that is, the hope of eternal life, glory, and perfection as a result of our faith in Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected from the dead and promises us that same victory over death. And we're not shifting away from the book of 1 Peter. But we are jumping ahead a bit in the

letter, to the third chapter, where Peter addresses women, particularly wives, and connects this idea of “hope” to the day-to-day life of the women in the church.

Of course, Peter’s words to the women of his day are set in a very specific cultural context, one that is very different from our own. So understanding what God is saying to us today through Peter’s words will require some careful thinking and proper application. But that is our task today, and I trust that the Holy Spirit will help us as we give our attention to God’s word. We’ll return to this point in a few moments. But we have a bit of important ground to cover before we can tackle that matter.

[Slide 2] *Review*

Let’s not forget what the Bible most often means by “hope”: “*the confident expectation of future good which is not yet here, but is certain to come.*” Our hope is based on something that God has promised, which is therefore certain, and which gives us the confidence that we may rightly expect it in the future.

That’s a very different thing than what we often mean when we use the word “hope” in our ordinary conversations. We tend to say, “*I hope that . . .*” when we mean, “*I want this to happen,*” or “*I wish that this would be the case instead of what is the case.*” There is, however, a way we use the word “hope” today that begins to coincide with what the biblical authors mean by “hope”: when we use the word to refer to our aspirations or dreams of what we might become.

[Slide 3] *Introduction: A Woman’s Hope*

I’ve entitled this sermon, “A Woman’s Hope.” Now, I’m neither so young nor so naive as to imagine that I could know what every woman hopes for, or what all women hope for, or for that matter, what any one of you women are hoping for, in the sense of what you want, or what you wish would be the case instead of what is the case in your lives right now. So why would I have the audacity to speak as a man to women about a woman’s hope? For that matter, why would Peter, a man, speak as he does about a woman’s hope—what she ought to aspire to? Let me defend my message, if you will, by offering two bits of explanation (which is not intended to be “mansplainin”).

[Slide 4]

First, though I cannot know for certain what all women hope for, or what you are hoping for, I know something about what many women hope for, based on what I have observed and heard from women in my life over the years, and what other women have told me. And I have paid attention to the messages that come from various voices in our culture that are clearly aimed at women, and appear to be appealing to a hope that is assumed to be shared by women. Marketing, for

instance, succeeds by appealing to desires and aspirations that are commonly shared by a group. And it isn't hard to see what the experts in marketing and the popular media assume are the general hopes that women commonly have in our culture—what they want, what they wish were the case, what they aspire to or dream about becoming. (There's a reason that the Hallmark channel keeps pumping out endless versions of the same movie with a new title: because women watch it.) Let me list just a few of the more obvious ones.

- I hope I grow up to be pretty.
- I hope I get married (to a prince). I hope I get married to someone who will love me, who thinks I'm special, who wants me more than he wants someone or something else. I hope my wedding will be the most glorious day ever.
- I hope I have children, raise a family, and have grandchildren.
- I hope my husband will help me around the house—that our home and our family are as important to him as they are to me.
- I hope that my children grow up to be successful, that they are well, that they are safe, that they want to come home, that they will still want to talk to me when they grow up.
- I hope I don't outlive my children.
- I hope that my life matters. I hope I can make a difference in the world. I hope I can help people get along, that I can make the world better.
- I hope that wars and sickness and poverty and injustice all end.

Those are all common hopes of many, if not most women. And none of them are bad things to want. I'd say that they are, at the very least, normal and natural desires that are, or could be, genuinely godly desires. They are the kinds of desires that a healthy, normal girl or woman might have. So I'd like to go on record as saying that I do not think that Peter is attacking any of these kinds of desires. He is not saying that having these desires, these hopes or wishes for your life, is a sign that you are a bad person, or an ungodly woman, or any such thing.

I only point this out because there have been many times that the message of the church has been that women should be ashamed for caring at all about things like outward beauty. But that's really not what this passage in 1 Peter is saying.

[Slide 5]

The second bit of explanation I'd like to offer in defense of my message today has to do with the exhortation in 1 Peter 3 for the wives to submit to their husbands. The failure to appreciate the differences in the cultural contexts of the

women in Peter's day and women in our day can lead to a misunderstanding of his exhortation and a misapplication to our situation today. And if we seize on that word "submit," as if it were the key to the entire passage, we actually miss a more important point that Peter is trying to tell us.

Let's talk about the cultural differences between Peter's day and ours, as it relates to the place of women in society. Women in the first century had very limited options, compared to the men, or compared to women in our culture in our century. The Greco-Roman culture was strongly patriarchal, which meant that the men, particularly the wealthy men, held the positions of power in society. Women had no access to formal education, no access to a career outside the home, limited access to the public sphere, and were generally expected to confine themselves to the affairs of domestic life. Even the wealthy women (who appear to be the main women in view in this passage) had considerable restraints on their lives.

By contrast today, women in our society have freedoms and opportunities that the first-century women could not have imagined. There are more women than men attending colleges and universities in the U.S. today. Women are assumed to be capable of pursuing most, if not all, career options that are possible for men. And while there are inequalities of various kinds that remain—and most likely will continue, since human societies are comprised of sinful and imperfect people—in general, the notion that women should be confined to a domestic role in subservience to her husband or father is not very widely held, and those who hold to that idea are not representative either of the best of our society or the best of the church.

[Slide 6]

So when we read this command to the women that they are to "*submit yourselves to your own husbands*," we need to understand a few things clearly.

First, in a patriarchal society such as we see in the New Testament era, the normal cultural expectation for married women would have been to submit to their husband's authority, especially in public. To do otherwise would be to bring shame to him in the eyes of the community, and thus to undermine his social standing, which would negatively impact the family on every level. The family's well-being, financial stability, relationships in the community, and reputation would all be damaged. Encouraging wives to be submissive was not a message to keep women oppressed, but to prevent damage to the family and to the society.

Our society, though it still retains aspects of patriarchy, has a stronger cultural expectation of equality. We do not have the expectation that only males are capable of governing or functioning in business or education or other arenas in

the public sphere. Consequently, the relationship of husbands and wives in terms of their mutual standing in the society looks very different in our culture. Today, a husband who dominated his wife in a way that might have been acceptable in the first century would not be assumed to be acting honorably but abusively. So to insist that wives today must submit to their husbands *in the same way* as wives of the first century did to their husbands would actually be contrary to the spirit of this passage, as well as several other important portions of Scripture.

[Slide 7]

Second, Peter is writing to readers in a context where there are couples who are both Christians, as well as couples where the woman is a believer but the husband is not. This is unusual and striking. Normally, a wife simply followed her husband's religion. Yet Peter describes a situation where there are women who have become Christians, apparently with their non-believing husband's knowledge and at least tacit approval. Thus, a Christian woman, who began asserting her independence by refusing to acknowledge her husband's authority, would not only bring shame to her husband in the eyes of the community, but would bring shame on the church and the gospel. Instead of commending the gospel to those outside the church, she would be putting obstacles in the way of them coming to faith—not least of all, in the way of her own husband. As we'll see more clearly in a few weeks when we examine the latter part of chapter two, Peter's primary concern is that the believers, including the women, live redemptively, so that by following the example of Christ, they can model for those who do not know Jesus what it means to have a living hope that transforms our lives today.

[Slide 8]

Third, even in the first century, the understanding of what "submission" looked like in a Christian context was far different than what would be found in the wider culture. As Peter points out to the husbands in verses 7-12, there is an entirely different way of living as followers of Jesus. Disciples are not seeking power over others, or looking to establish their own authority; they are not trying to dominate others, but to serve. Disciples of Christ are more concerned with how they treat others than with how they are treated. "Submission" in the church would therefore be a characteristic trait of both men and women—not servility or low self-esteem, feeling worthless and ashamed, but the glad acceptance of the opportunity to serve others as a way to demonstrate the love of God.

[Slide 9]

Fourth, the directive to husbands to "be considerate" of their wives and to treat them with respect means something stronger than simply remembering to

lower the toilet seat. The recognition that women are equal heirs of the gift of life was a revolutionary idea in the first century. “Salvation” was something that was reserved for the men. Women were merely afterthoughts. But the Christian message claimed that both men and women were equal partners in the inheritance of eternal life. Peter’s command to the husbands to treat their wives with respect meant that the men needed to understand something very basic about Christian faith: *these women were being given honor by God that was equal to their own, and therefore must be treated accordingly in the home and in the public settings when the church gathered.* Furthermore, the men needed to ensure that others honored the women appropriately. Since women were “weaker,” that is, more vulnerable physically and socially, it was the responsibility of the husbands to make sure that their wives were treated with respect and honor—and to set the example for the other men by showing her that respect and honor both in the home and in public.

[Slide 10]

So there are some culturally relative aspects to this command of Peter’s that do not translate perfectly into our cultural setting. That doesn’t mean that we can simply ignore this command entirely, however. It does mean that we need to be sensitive to the nuances of the differences between our own culture and that of the biblical setting. Yes, there is a proper submission of wives to husbands—but it’s not one-sided. Both are to be submissive to the Lord, and to his rulership, rather than trying to maintain male dominance in the home. And husbands are responsible for demonstrating how to treat their wives with honor, both in the home and in public. As leaders in the church, men ought to be leading the effort to cultivate a culture of honor within the church that recognizes the value and equal status of women as joint heirs of eternal life.

[Slide 11]

What, then, is Peter’s message to women about their hope? What is it that is so important for us to grasp today? What should women hope to become? What should they aspire to? To answer that, let’s consider another question: *What is it that lies underneath all of those desires, those wishes, those hopes that are so common among ladies?*

I think there’s a clue for us in verse 3. Peter is addressing the common habits of wealthy women in his day to adorn themselves with elaborate hairstyles, with jewels and expensive ribbons woven into their hair in a way that showed off their wealth, and thus their status. Gold necklaces, gold bracelets, gold rings were even better, for they signified an excess of wealth, having enough to waste.

Expensive robes and dresses marked the wealthy women as better than the rest, a class above, since the poorer women would generally have only a single, plain outer garment over a basic tunic.

That tendency for a woman to display her wealth and status in her manner of dress hides a basic need, an inner desire: “*I want to be noticed. I want to be special.*” And Peter does not chastise the women for their desire—it is, after all, a normal and natural desire. It is the hope of every child—to be noticed, to be special, to be seen and wanted. The desire itself is not inherently evil. But it can become evil.

[Slide 12]

What Peter does say, is that these outward displays that are designed to gain the attention of those around, to show off not only your wealth and status, but your class, your good taste, are aimed at the wrong camera. He contrasts these displays of outward beauty with a beauty he says is “unfading.”

There’s that word again, from chapter one—“*unfading,*” something Peter said was true about our eternal inheritance. This inner beauty would never lose its luster, never lose its value or its freshness. Outer beauty, on the other hand, well, it tends to pass away, and much more quickly than we’d like—and takes more and more time and effort to maintain!

By the way, as I hinted earlier, Peter does not say that it is wrong to want to look nice or to use whatever means are at your disposal to do so. [*Women wearing make-up?*] But he does strongly encourage women to focus their attention elsewhere—on the inner person of the heart. When you focus on developing the inner character, your inner beauty that is unfading, two things happen.

[Slide 13]

(1) You actually begin to develop spiritual strength that is built on the foundation of the personal knowledge of God’s love for you. And that knowledge that God loves you fills up the need you have to be noticed—because you realize that your Father is taking notice of you. It fills that need to be special—because your Father thinks you’re special. That inner beauty of godliness is of great worth to God, Peter says. It never diminishes in value—and it’s never out of style!

[Slide 14]

(2) The second thing that happens is a consequence of ending the focus on gaining the attention of others (and their approval or even their envy)—it frees you to start paying attention to the people around you. When you’re not consumed by trying to get attention, you’re freed to love others. And by dressing less ostentatiously, you help those with less so that they don’t feel ashamed when

they're around you, like they don't really belong. So you help to raise the spirits of everyone else, which encourages the whole church and helps promote the health of the entire body of Christ.

[Slide 15]

Let's notice, now, what Peter marks out as the characteristics of this inner beauty. He refers to it as a "*gentle and quiet spirit*." That is not the same thing as having a "*gentle and quiet personality*." Introverted, shy women are not the only ones who can have inner beauty. And Peter isn't insisting that all women need to be shy and quiet in order to be godly. Shy and quiet are not the same thing as godliness. I've known women who were introverts who were as far from a quiet or gentle spirit as you could get. They were quiet on the outside, but inside they were seething with rage or paralyzed by racing anxieties or plotting their rebellion and how to escape from their situation. But they were just too afraid to show their emotions in public.

[Slide 16]

"*Quiet*" here means "*settled*," "*at peace*." It is marked by the ability to be calm, to be untroubled by fear or panic. "*Quiet*" is the opposite of being constantly in turmoil; chaotic; frenzied. Now, "*a quiet spirit*" looks different when you've got three kids under the age of six or when you're battling with an overflowing toilet that's stopped up because someone tried to flush a stuffed animal that was stuck right when dinner was about to come out of the oven, or when you have to race to grab your two-year old from stepping out into traffic—or your mom. Those aren't the times when you measure your quiet spirit. You'll get a false negative from that reading. But a quiet spirit shows up and shows through, even in those times when the demands of the moment require a rapid response of action, because you're stable, you're not unhinged. Self-control is at work, even when you have to become Supermom or help your parents move out of their home.

[Slide 17]

Similarly, "*gentle*" doesn't mean "*weak*." Gentleness is shown not by the absence of strength, but by how you use your strength. You can be firm and still be gentle. You can wrestle with a kid and still be gentle. You can discipline your kids, even spank your kids, and still be gentle. A gentle spirit is marked by kindness; it's the opposite of being abusive, or violent, or aggressive, or threatening. Instead of throwing tantrums (or heavy/sharp objects), the woman with a gentle spirit can absorb an oversight, or overlook an unkind remark from an angry teenager. Being gentle means being quick to forgive, quick to show mercy, quick to offer help. (By the way—and this is really a tangent, but it's related to

being gentle while being firm and it illustrates the point—one of the reasons we always used a wooden spoon instead of our hands when we spanked our kids was that we never wanted them to associate our touching them with pain or discipline. We didn't want them to be afraid of our hands when we reached to touch them. And they weren't. . . . but now that I think of it, I don't know if any of them have wooden spoons in their kitchens.)

[Slide 18]

Peter also says that the inner beauty of a godly woman will show in her outward character. He specifically points to two markers: purity and reverence.

When you hear “purity,” of course we think of moral purity, specifically sexual fidelity, faithfulness to your spouse. Adultery and sexual immorality were just as common and just as tempting in the first century as they are today. And they do just as much damage to your soul, to the inner person, to the family, and to the culture today as they did when Peter wrote these words.

But moral purity extends to other areas as well. It includes your speech, your honesty, your attitudes towards other people. Moral purity shows up when you keep a promise, or a confidence; when you do things the right way without cutting corners; when you refuse to take a bribe or listen to gossip or to cheat on a test or on your taxes.

[Slide 19]

The other marker Peter points to is reverence, your attitude toward God and holy things. But reverence is something that goes beyond merely being religious. And it has nothing to do with being quiet in church, by the way. You can be absolutely silent in church and totally irreverent in your heart and attitudes, ridiculing in your mind everything that goes on around you. Reverence is a way of looking at the world. It is seeing everything through the lens of gratitude to God for all that he has given, and the lens of responsibility, wanting to honor him for what he has given you by caring for it. Reverence means determining to honor what is good, whatever reflects God's nature and ways. It is the opposite of what we see in so much of popular culture today, where holy things and godly attitudes and habits are mocked, and shameful things are applauded.

[Slide 20]

Both of these qualities, Peter says, will not only be evidence of your inner beauty. They will be effective means for demonstrating the truth and power of the gospel. As God changes you, others will see that change, including your husband, if you are married to someone who is not a believer. They can be won without words—because they see the gospel lived out right in front of them.

[Slide 21]

This is the hope that the apostle Peter calls women to have. This is what he exhorts women to aspire to; what all women should hope to become—someone who is characterized by inner beauty, by the development of a gentle and quiet spirit that shows itself in a pure and reverent life. Let this be your adornment, ladies. Let this be the thing that others notice about you, the characteristic that attracts the attention of those who look at you, that attracts the attention of God, who highly values your inner beauty. All of those other hopes, of getting married (to a prince), having children, being special, being liked, being chosen, and so on—all of those desires can end up with you being disappointed. Not very many women get to marry a prince or win a beauty contest. Some women never have any children. Some never marry, or fail in their marriage. Some have to bury a child. And even if you realize some of those hopes and dreams—they still can't compare to the value of beauty that is unfading.

Hold onto that hope of unfading inner beauty. Aspire to that goal. Pay more attention to what is lasting than what is passing away. Let the thought of being known and celebrated by God for your purity of heart and life, your reverence toward God and all that he has given us, your gentle and quiet spirit—let that be what captures your imagination and grips your heart. Make it your hope to realize the fullness of that vision of God for you. Whatever personality you might be, whatever status you have as a woman—single, married, divorced, widowed, young or old, mother, grandmother, or childless—set your hope on this: to be a woman whose inner heart and outward character are glorious displays of the love God has for you, and the love of God that can shine through you to others.

[Slide 22]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . .]

We are about to take communion, the reminder of the basis for our hope. If you have a piece of bread and some grape juice, or something that can stand in for them, go ahead and get them now, and set them aside for a moment.

The apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthian church that each of us should examine ourselves when we come to celebrate communion. He wasn't telling us that we need to scrutinize our lives to come up with a listing of every possible sin we could remember committing. But he was saying that communion is not simply a ritual to be repeated as if was the secret handshake for a club. When we take the elements of bread and cup, we affirm our faith in Jesus Christ. So it's

important to examine our hearts to ensure that our affirmation of faith is genuine. Even better, we should ask the Holy Spirit to examine us, and reveal anything he wants to point out to us.

With that in mind, we're going to spend a little extra time preparing our hearts before taking communion. We'll sing two songs before we partake of the elements together. One of them was the request of a woman in our church, and it fits very nicely into today's service. Both of them will serve you well as you invite the Lord to deal with your heart and prepare yourself to make or reaffirm your commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

For those of you who might be making your commitment for the first time, the promise of God is this: if you sincerely repent of your sins and invite Jesus to be your Lord; if you confess that he is the Son of God who died in your place, to pay the price for your sins, then he will come in to your heart and live in you through his Spirit. You'll be born again. You'll have a new hope, a living hope. So use this time to offer your heart to God. After we're done singing, we'll finish by taking the elements together.

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