

THE CURIOUS PATH TO FRUITFULNESS

1 Peter 3:7

Let's read 1 Peter 3, 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."

I told some people this week that I was preaching on this verse and they responded by saying, "Why? Why would you do this to yourself? Why would you pick this verse, which seems to really challenge us and maybe even be a little bit offensive to us?" Anything that has to do with gender and with men and with women is a bit of a hot topic for us. If you've been here for any length of time, you may have heard me say this before. When we get to a passage where we're not sure what it means, or we are afraid that what it might mean challenges us or even offends us, we should run to that passage instead of away from it. There is something that we learn; there is something that happens to us when we work through challenges in scripture.

Augustine said it this way. He said that sometimes the love of God is clear in scripture and sometimes it's concealed. When it's clear, it immediately nourishes us. It nurtures us because we need understanding in order to grow. But sometimes it's concealed and he used this phrase: It exercises us.

What happens is, in the struggle of the interaction, we go to God and say, "God, I don't know. This passage doesn't make you look more glorious as I see it. It makes you look less glorious, and that can't be right. I need your help to understand it and to comprehend it." Augustine would say that helps us in a way that we can't be helped if we are just looking at the clear passages. In fact, we need both the clear and the concealed. To live in the shallows is to have a shallow, indifferent, boring approach to God. **God is anything but boring. And if he's boring to you, it's because you are not dealing with the reality of who he really is and his massive claim on your life.**

So this passage challenges me in two ways:

- 1) What's up with "the woman is the weaker vessel?" Not met my wife.
- 2) Secondly, it seems to imply or insinuate that prayer, grace is earned – that there is something I have to do to qualify. That, in and of itself, seems contrary to the overall message of scripture and contrary to grace itself.

That's why I've titled this message "The Curious Path to Fruitfulness." Part of my motivation here is to bring before us an example of a difficult passage and work through it. I think it will provide an opportunity for us to see grace and spirituality from a little different angle, and that's going to help us. Also, I do have the motivation of strengthening marriages. Marriage can be difficult. Sometimes it can be very difficult. The divorce rate is very high. Many marriages fail. Many of you have been touched by divorce, either directly or indirectly in some way. Even those who in their own marriage have not, sometimes there are difficulties.

I would say, and I think my wife would agree, that marriage may be the most rewarding experience of our lives. It has also been challenging. That would be our testimony. That would be our experience. It's not that way, certainly not to the same degree, for everyone. Having said that, I don't think either one of us wakes up in the morning saying, "Okay, here we go again." That's not the point. We are experiencing God's grace. Certainly, I think we have grown to a place where that characterizes our relationship. She is such a gift to me and by far my best friend in this life. So I want to speak to marriages today as well.

A little bit about this thought of how you actually have veto power for your own prayer... You can cancel out your prayer before it ever gets to God. You know, the President of the United States has veto power. He can veto an act of Congress, and you have the power to do that. It's very rare. In fact, there are only a couple of instances that are really clear in scripture, but there are a few things you can do that will stop your prayer. One is unforgiveness. Scripture warns very strongly against harboring offense and not letting it go. Jesus taught this in more than one place. We are warned against it rather strongly.

Forgiveness in general is a complicated subject. It's not today's message, but as I put that example out there, let me just explain that I don't mean you are condoning horrible things or even ignoring them. It doesn't mean that you are always restored completely to the person that has offended you or that you have offended. But it does mean, as a starting point, you release it to God. You trust God with it rather than trying to exact judgment from that person. Failure to do that is very dangerous for your own spiritual condition and spiritual health.

A couple of years ago I had an incident where someone in my life (not a part of this church) offended me very deeply. This had been a pattern in this particular relationship. And without consciously thinking this, perhaps not being aware that I was thinking it, I just said, "That's it. I'm done. I'm cutting this person off. I'm not going to call anymore." I felt like the burden of the relationship was on me, that I was always initiating and I was always giving. I said, "That's it. I'm done." I went on and I was okay with it.

Then about eight or ten months later, I will not forget, I was driving down 81st Avenue right over here. For a while I had been in this really dry place. Nothing was working spiritually. The Lord impressed on my heart: "You have

offense. You have not released. You are holding in bondage someone who has offended you.” I was like, “Wow.” So I said, “Lord, forgive me.” It only took me ten months to get there. “I release it to you.” And I called that person. If that makes me sound super spiritual, you are missing the point. The sin was self-righteousness. I was really convinced I was right and I’d been right for so long that I was entitled to say, “You are permanently wrong and you are out of my life.”

Here’s the instruction that helps us. In one sense that was hindering me spiritually, right? But then, sometimes Congress can override the President’s veto, with two-thirds vote. We’ll just go back to political science for a minute, all the way back to those things you didn’t learn, but way back. I actually had to look it up. Is it three-fourths or two-thirds? It’s two-thirds. Sometimes God overrides our veto in his mercy. He says, “Oh, you want to know why you are struggling a little bit right now? It’s because you have bitterness in your heart.” And God mercifully draws us back to himself.

Here is the instruction that I think helps us a lot. Some behavior is so anti-grace that it keeps us from living in grace and experiencing grace. And if God blesses that behavior, he is actually blessing something that moves us away from God rather than toward God. Because God loves us, he’s not going to bless that. He’s not going to overlook it. He’s going to confront it in our lives.

I say that, being very aware that the illustration I used about my offense is really very trivial compared to some of the hurt or the offense that you’ve dealt with. Maybe I’ll come back at another time and preach more on the issue of forgiveness. Let me just say this: Go before God and get grace to just trust God with it. Let him bring justice if that’s what needs to happen. But for your own spiritual good, fight that fight to release it.

So what is the issue here in 1 Peter 3:7? I think if unforgiveness is self-righteousness or pride, here it’s the abuse of grace. It’s taking God’s grace and using it to mistreat someone else. Everything you have in life – your power, your influence, your position, your gifts – they are the embodiment of God’s general or common grace to you. If you use your strength in whatever way it’s exhibited in your life to oppress others rather than to bless others, God will block you. Because you are taking God’s power, God’s goodness, and rather than reflecting it back to him in love and then loving others, you are using that to hurt someone, and God’s not going to bless that. It actually moves you away from the Lord.

I think that this is Peter’s main theme in the letter. In fact, if you look at 1 Peter 5:2 as he is closing out the letter, he says, “I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace. The true grace of God – stand firm in it. There are many false understandings of grace. Grace is God’s favor, God’s acceptance, God’s standing, God’s goodness in your life that you don’t deserve or don’t earn, that you receive just as a gift from him. It really is

amazing and mind-blowing and incredibly generous of God, as an understatement, that it's possible to take that and then to turn it into something false, something that's destructive, something that is used as an excuse or liberty for sin or to mistreat other people.

So Peter is saying, "I'm speaking to you the true message of the grace of God and I'm giving you instruction on how to stand firm in it, how to stand in grace, how to flow in grace, how to live in God's grace – how to live your life with God's favor on your life. **The main idea then, for this message and I think it flows throughout 1 Peter, is to live graciously with others – to let God's grace flow through you to other people so that God's grace might just keep flowing.**

Today we are going to then look at three points about fruitfulness: The What, The How and The Why of Fruitfulness. Let's start with:

I. The What of Fruitfulness.

He tells husbands: Live with your wives, live with women, live in an understanding way. He gives us something to do. "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way..." He is calling us to a companionship, an intimacy, an open-heartedness. What happens is, when we are offended or disappointed and we allow ourselves emotionally to go far enough into a place of darkness, we are tempted to separate ourselves from our marriage partner. We are tempted to just say, "Alright, if you're going to insist on that, if you're going to act that way, I'm done with you." We may in that moment just feel like, "I'm done with you right now" but if we allow ourselves to get worked up enough, we are just like: "I'm done. I'm completely done," and maybe we won't leave, but emotionally we've left.

Peter says, "No, no, listen. This is what I want you to do. I want you to work to empathize, to understand your wife. I don't want you to use whatever influence and power and gift you have to isolate, but I want you to use it to pursue." So husbands, I give you this word: Pursue your wife. I think that's a way to live out this verse. Pursue her physically, intimately, sexually. I thought I'd get an Amen there at least. That's biblical, right? You are one, and you are one in every way. The lack of physical intimacy, generally speaking, points to some kind of breach. And it's not something you just snap your fingers to restore. There's a pursuit of God and a pursuit of one another that needs to happen. Emotionally pursue. Relationally pursue. As a friend, pursue. Pursue spiritually.

I think the word initiate is a helpful word. It's not only the husband who initiates. That's not the point. But it's very helpful to contrast these two images of a husband. One husband is trying to anticipate. He's trying to understand. He's initiating what he believes to be the will of God. Then he is respecting his wife's response. He is initiating and

respecting, initiating and respecting. And if she is not responding, he, in love, just keeps initiating what he believes to be the will of God.

I counseled a husband many years ago. His wife didn't come to church with him, didn't want to go to church. He said, "I don't know what to do." It wasn't a health-related issue or anything else. I said, "Just keep initiating. But listen, don't get ugly. Don't get self-righteous." Just say: "Hey, Sweetheart, I'm going to church today. I'd love for you to go with me. I'd like for us to worship the Lord together." Just keep initiating.

There is a movie called, *Mrs. Brown*. It's a very old movie. It's not really that good a movie, but it illustrates this point rather powerfully. The King of England dies and his widow is entrusted with all of this power. She goes into a state of grieving and remains there for years. She wears black and pulls the shades. I don't know how you pull the shades of a castle, but she's just living in seclusion. No one knows what to do. So they bring down from the Highlands of Scotland, Mr. Brown. He has a horse. He comes to take the Queen riding, so he shows up. He has his kilt and all his garb on, dressed for service. He comes to the front door of the castle, but she is like, "Who does he think he is? Send him away! Get him out of here! I'm in mourning." So he goes back and puts the horse up in the barn. He comes back the next day with the horse. She gets mad and sends him away. For a while she gets madder and madder and madder, but he just keeps initiating, gently initiating. And one day she comes out and rides a horse. Eventually he wins her heart, so much that they begin to call the queen "Mrs. Brown."

It's a helpful picture of living in an understanding way. Pursuing, not assuming we know what our partner is thinking, not attributing uncharitable motivations. We are amazing this way, aren't we? "I know what she's thinking. I know why she did that." We are not only so smart that we know exactly what she's thinking, we know the way all women are. We've figured out the whole female gender. "They're all that way." We do this, and scripture says it's an uncharitable judgment.

I've told this story a million times, but my daughter used to play soccer. She was on a team and she's an amazing talent. It's genetic. They were playing for the championship, but she was sitting on the bench. I was mad about this, so I made a beeline for the coach after the game. (They eventually put her in and she scored the winning goal, by the way.) When I got to the coach, the coach knew what was coming and said, "Your daughter was sick and asked not to play."

You see, I've assigned motivation on my very imperfect knowledge and I'm convinced, but it's an uncharitable judgment. We really don't know what another person is feeling and thinking, and their words are not always a direct line to their hearts. Why would we trust one another with what's deep within our hearts when we are hurting and reeling? We actually disguise it many times. It takes love and grace to draw it out.

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Can I pause here for a second? A few of you hearing this message may not be husbands. You're thinking, "Okay, you are speaking to husbands, right? That's the target." Here's how I think we come to these passages and part of the benefit for us. You've got to take the principle and universalize it in the sense that there's a principle underneath the application here. Sometimes it helps us to see that principle applied to a given role or a given situation even when we don't fit that role or situation. We learn from the instruction.

The general principle here is found in 1 Peter 2:17. He says, "**Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.**" Peter sets this up, then this principle is what governs all of the next section, all the way through what we are reading in chapter 3, verse 7.

In fact, our text begins with "likewise" in verse 7. "Likewise, husbands..." Go up to verse 1 of the same chapter: "Likewise, wives..." That word "likewise" is pointing back to this verse. He is going through different relationships, different roles, applying this principle. If you look at it, it's pretty clear. There are four categories of relationship:

1. **Honor everyone.** Respect everyone. Show them dignity because they are made in the image of God.
2. **Love the brotherhood.** Let your relationships within the church be characterized richly by love and sacrifice of self for others.
3. **Fear God.** Now we move from the horizontal to the vertical, and the relationship with God is on a whole different level. We fear God in the sense that we live to please him. It's ultimately his pleasure that we seek. We want to do what is his will. So this is a problem if you fear your wife or fear your husband or fear your job. It's God that ultimately we look to and worship. Then fourthly:
4. **We show respect to governing officials, to God-ordained authorities.** It doesn't mean they're always right. It doesn't mean we have to say they're always right, but we do it respectfully.

So, there are four categories. Now he's fleshing that out in various relationships. In verse 7 he gets to husbands and this is how he does it. His particular concern is the abuse of power. So, what do we do? We live in an understanding way. Let's go to #2.

II. The How of Fruitfulness.

How do we live in an understanding way? We do it by showing honor. We do it by respecting from the heart. That's why when I use the words "initiate" and "pursue" to characterize what it means to live in an understanding way, I

wanted to qualify that by saying, “and respect the response of the person” – which happens only if we really have honor in our hearts toward that person, if we respect them.

There are many ways that we disrespect people. We dismiss their perspective. We say my wife or my husband or my boss or this person – they’re not intelligent or they’re too emotional or they’re really consumed by fear or they are controlling, or they’re passive aggressive. We have all kinds of labels that we use to diminish their personhood and the legitimacy of their perspective so that we feel justified in not showing honor and not living with them in an understanding way.

There are many applications to this, if you want to go to the general principle in chapter 2, verse 17. Social media presents a lot of opportunities for you to show disrespect to people, whether it’s politicians and government officials or people who disagree with you. It’s very important to the Christians who are here that we communicate in a respectful way. **We should not shrink back from conviction, from truth, from speaking our minds, but let’s do it in a way where we are loving people.**

So we show honor. In a few instances I have found myself counseling Christians and even pastors and church leaders who have had a fallout, and there is deep unforgiveness and resentment. When you want to care for that person and you try to gently challenge that, more than once I’ve heard this response: “Yes, but they’re not even a Christian.” What are we saying when we do that? We are saying, “I’m not responsible to treat them in a loving way. I’m releasing myself from doing the hard work which they put on me.” Maybe that’s legitimately what happened.

This illustration helps me. When our kids were small we made them eat their food. I know, we are horrible, horrible people, but we actually wanted them to eat what was before them. We went through the battles. There were so many times when I thought it would be so much easier just to say “No, you don’t have to eat your carrots,” or whatever it was.

On occasion they would say, “Dad, you know I hate this,” and for some reason I’d say, “Okay, you don’t have to eat it.” You know the next thing they’d do? They’d take it off their plate and put it on my plate. They were making a declaration to the nations: “I’m not responsible for these carrots.” That’s what they’d do. And I think that’s what we want to do spiritually. I’m taking it off my plate. I’m just not responsible.

Going back to some of the complexities of these issues, maybe you are not supposed to say, “That was okay,” or “That was permissible,” or “I condone that.” “No, that was wrong. You haven’t repented of it. You haven’t owned it,” and that puts a block between what we can do in our relationship. I don’t take a sexual abuser and put them with a victim and tell the victim, “Okay, just forgive them.” I don’t want them to be in the same room, probably ever. I want

to respect this person over here so that I don't make them submit to the horror of that. But I want to care for them to help them release it to God, and that may take a long, long time. But we need to do that for one another, right?

We want to show honor. One of the temptations for us, especially in more superficial ways that can be really dangerous, is to label the person. We write them off. We have uncharitable judgments towards them and it's dangerous for us to do so. The "How" here is: **We show respect.**

Now, let's deal with the elephant in the room. Women are called here the weaker vessel. I want to just say that this is not my direct answer to "What does this mean?" but I want to be clear. Scripturally, the genders are different. Male and female are different, created together in the image of God. Gender is determined by the Creator. It is not fluid, according to scripture. It's not mobile, but it's fixed in the Lord.

We should not be surprised as Christians, because we live in a fallen world, that all of that, and the understanding of it, and the very foundations are fractured in our society. We should respond compassionately, lovingly, not with a mocking spirit, not with a hateful attitude. Not apologizing for the truth, but in love, expressing the truth and patiently walking with people who are all over the place in society in terms of understanding sexuality and sex itself and gender. We need to walk in a loving, patient way as we hold up what we understand biblically to be the truth.

I don't think weaker in any way means emotionally, morally, intellectually. I believe if you step back from it and you remove the offense, you will say: "Wow, look at scripture really speaking to the practical reality of mankind." We are in the 21st century and there is this massive #MeToo movement of women who are standing up, saying "We have been sexually and physically abused and taken advantage of. Position has been used against us." There is a movement.

You may have different opinions about that movement. I started to say I don't want to hear them, but that's not a nice thing to say, is it? I realize that this little parenthesis you may not agree with. I personally think there's legitimacy to the concern. I'm not talking about the politics of it, but it demonstrates the brokenness of sin that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. I think, friends, that Peter is addressing the misuse of power. If you place yourself in the first century, there is no doubt that positionally and socially women are in a very weak position. Peter is saying, "Men, do not use this in an abusive way. Do not misuse your power, but use it to help people."

It might help you – it helps me just to see this. If you go back to verse 1, Peter speaks to women. Women, he gives you six verses. You may not like it. You may dislike it more than you like verse 7. "Likewise..." there it is, pointing back to verse 17:

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...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.

Just stop there for a moment. Here is the abuse of grace. It's not as strong, but here's what I think is happening. It was unheard of for a woman in the first century to have a religion different than her husband. She went with her husband as her husband went. You have in the early church women coming to Christ without their husbands and that decision is blessed and right. Jesus himself said husband will be separated from wife, mother from child. Scripture in one sense says that all of us come before God and this very verse, 1 Peter 3:7, says we are all heirs of the grace of life. We are all on equal footing, equal standing before God in God's grace.

The danger that Peter addresses to the wives is (here's a paraphrase): Don't take your freedom that you now have in Jesus and use it in an unhelpful way, in an abusive way. Don't flaunt your freedom in order to create stumbling blocks to others and division and brokenness in relationship. If you are a Christian woman in a relationship married to a man who is not a Christian, you may win him through just a quiet and a gentle spirit. Then, the emphasis given here is a principle (I think it's culturally applied) that your true beauty is inner beauty, not outer beauty. He is really, I think, reinforcing the message of liberty, the message of true freedom that is yours in Christ. It's not that beauty is bad, but don't allow, don't make your identity about physical beauty because no matter how beautiful you may be, that's fleeting and passing. Are you with me?

So, how? We show honor. Is the weaker designation physical? Is it positional? Is it status? In some ways I think it's helpful to have a little bit of ambiguity here because it allows us the flexibility of saying whatever gifts God has given you, whoever you are, use those to help people. You are different than someone else. Use that in a way that brings blessing, and never disrespectfully, in an unhelpful way forces the hand of another.

Let's go to #3.

III. The Why of Fruitfulness.

So that your prayers may not be hindered. You know, if you have a weed eater or an edger or a blower, there is a kill switch on it. When you are done, you hit a switch and it kills the engine. If you come out the next time to start it and you don't remember that you had the kill switch flipped and you try to start it, it will never start. That's the picture that

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we are given here by Peter. He says, “Hey, you’re doing something in your life that’s hindering, that’s hampering, that’s killing your prayer.” He gives us the positive. Positive, positive, negative. “Live with in an understanding way.” “Show honor.” And then he flips it and gives us a negative. It’s very powerful. “So that your prayers will not be hindered.” We are heirs of the grace of life. We are one in marriage. **We are together, and as we learn to live graciously together, we experience God’s power.**

I do believe, friends, that as we wrestle with these difficult passages, we come to a place where we have to confront. “Okay, the Lord tells me that the role of a husband, not the value, but the role of a husband is different from the role of a wife. That doesn’t take first century applications. It takes 21st century, but there is still a truth here about male and female, husband and wife, which means there are different dangers for each, respectively. That may challenge my sensibilities, but it helps me kneel before God. It helps me fear God and say, “You made me. If I ignore those realities, I set myself up to fall into the danger that’s there, that I’m trying to deny is even a part of my existence.”

I don’t recommend that this be your first line of reasoning with someone who doesn’t know Jesus. At the water jug in your office I would not say, “Hey, by the way, did you know that God says wives are to be subject to their husbands?” I wouldn’t start with that. In fact, I would probably leave that alone, period, except that we wrestle with it in discipleship.