

Mixed Marriages

A Sermon on 1 Peter 3:1-6

by John M. Frame

This text and I go back a long way. I guess it was about twenty years ago now that a friend asked me to preach a sermon at his wedding. The odd thing about this request was that in those days I was known as a somewhat crusty bachelor without much capacity for romantic gush. I knew that if I preached a typical wedding sermon, rhapsodizing over the joys of wedded bliss, no one would buy it. Everyone knew that I hadn't the slightest acquaintance with or real appreciation for, wedded bliss.

So I preached a sermon from this passage, entitled, with a bit of irony, "Marriage as Unjust Suffering." That sermon title was based on the broader context of the passage. One of Peter's main concerns in the letter, perhaps the main concern, is to encourage and challenge Christians who are enduring various kinds of suffering, especially unjust suffering.

In this situation, Peter writes to encourage and challenge them with the vision of Jesus Christ. If anyone ever endured wrongful suffering, unjust suffering, certainly it was Jesus Christ. Here was a man perfectly just. Peter calls him a lamb without blemish, without spot (1:19), in the language of the Old Testament sacrifices. But though he was perfectly righteous, he endured incredible sufferings and torments at the hands of wicked men (2:22ff.). Yet even then, Peter says, "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they insulted him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."

Jesus not only endured suffering; he laid down his *life* — voluntarily — dying in our place, for our sins. You see, we all have sinned against God and therefore against Jesus. We have all hated him, dishonored him, reviled him; we are all guilty. And Jesus not only accepted willingly the force of our murderous hatred, but he died to save us from that hatred, from the wrath of God against that hatred: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (2:24).

Because he has healed us, we can live as he did. Jesus' people are a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (2:9). The imitation of Christ is not only doing good deeds; it also involves responding to evil the way he did. Like him, we can live in the midst of

persecution and tribulation without reviling, without threatening, without anxious fear, but patiently, calmly, quietly, even so as to win over our persecutors! Praise God, we can live and suffer, like Jesus Christ!

Now Peter mentions several different situations in which Christians are likely to endure unjust suffering. The first is government (2:13-17). His message fits our contemporary situation remarkably well, a situation in which government and those national opinion makers who have the most influence upon government are increasingly hostile to the free expression and practice of Christianity, to Christian discipline of children, to home schooling and Christian schools, to the biblical teachings about sexuality, abortion, and the Sabbath. Peter would doubtless uphold the right of Christians to follow biblical standards. But his actual advice, what he chooses to say in this situation, is, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake” (2:13). “Be good citizens,” he says, “show proper respect to everyone, and you will bring shame on your persecutors.”

Then in 2:18-25, he talks about persecution in the master/slave relationship. That is an especially hard situation, and it was common in Peter’s day: more Christians were slaves than masters, and they were subject to all kinds of cruelty. Peter knows that a Christian slave might be tempted to fight back, to rebel. But no, he says, be in *subjection* to them, even if they are wicked and cruel. And work hard — it is better to suffer unjustly than to suffer for your own faults. We must, he says, be willing to suffer wrongfully, for that is the way of Christ.

You see the pattern of unjust suffering: as citizens, as slaves . . . and then in marriage! What a great theme for a crusty old bachelor, marriage as unjust suffering!

Well, I preached my friend’s wedding sermon. Seven years later I moved to California, and soon afterward Dick asked me to preach a message as part of a marriage and family series. “Marriage and family series?” I thought? I was still a crusty old bachelor; what did I know about marriage and family? So I got out the old sermon on 1 Peter 3. Then wouldn’t you know, in 1984 I got married. And rather than politely forgetting my sermon on Marriage as Unjust Suffering, Dick thought it would be interesting for me to rethink the material from a post-marital perspective and to preach, with my wife and three new stepchildren in the congregation, “Marriage as Unjust Suffering — Revisited.”

Somehow I got through that experience without any repercussions, until this summer. Last June, one of our lovely and efficient church secretaries called me at my seminary office and said that Dick would appreciate my preaching for him sometime. What times were available, I asked? “Oh, July third, July tenth,” came

the reply, “and then there’s one in September.” Feeling I needed more time to prepare, I asked “What week in September?” The answer: “It’s on September 27, but that’s during the Marriage and Family series, and the Scripture text has already been selected.” “What scripture text might that be?” I asked. “Let’s see . . . oh, 1 Peter 3:1-6.” Well, I’ll leave it for you to judge whether I’ve been manipulated. Actually, in my heart of hearts I don’t mind, because it is a great passage. Although (to wrap up this already too long bit of autobiography), when I heard Ed Clowney expounding it last year I had a good mind to wrap up all my past efforts and put them in the circular bin.

Well, let’s try again. I’ve given you a taste my previous sermon, which focused on the “unjust suffering” theme in the larger context. Let’s look a bit more closely at the passage itself and the issue of mixed marriages between believers and unbelievers which Peter raises in verse one. Actually, this passage is not limited to mixed marriages. The principles here bear on all marriages. Peter doesn’t say, “Wives, if you are in a mixed marriage, be submissive to your husbands.” Rather, he says, simply, “Wives, in the same way, be submissive to your husbands.” This passage is for all of us. Where, then, does the mixed marriage issue come in? Well, listen to Peter: “Wives, in the same way [willingness to accept unjust suffering] be submissive to your 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.” Get that? “*If* any of them do not believe the word.” Peter is stating principles for *all* marriages; but some marriages are mixed marriages. And if your marriage is a mixed marriage, these principles will have an evangelistic effect. These ideas are good for all marriages, but for mixed marriages, they carry a special blessing, for they can lead to unity in Christ.

Now I want to say more about mixed marriages; but first just a word to those whose marriages are not mixed, where both partners are Christians. If you are in that happy position, use 1 Peter 3 this way: Keep asking yourself, “If my husband were an unbeliever, would my words and behavior lead him to Christ, or away from Christ?” Husbands ask, “If my wife were an unbeliever, would my life give her a desire to share my faith?” Maybe we need to think of our homes more by way of evangelistic analogies. In an evangelistic church like ours, you know, the danger is that we will be full of love for unbelievers, trying to show them the beauty of the Christian life, and then when we get home, perhaps from sheer exhaustion, to treat our wives, our husbands, our children, our Christian friends, in a very ungodly way. We need to keep asking, “If my wife, if my husband, if my friend were an unbeliever, would he or she be attracted to Jesus through me?”

The Christian life ought to be open to all, transparent in this way: we shouldn’t practice one kind of behavior around unbelievers and a totally different

kind of behavior around believers. Jesus saves us from this kind of double mindedness. If all of life is focused on him, then the result will be a godly consistency of life — adaptable, to be sure, to different situations — but faithful always to the standards of God’s word.

Now I hope I’ve got your attention to look at the rest of this passage. If you are in a mixed marriage, listen very closely. If you’re not in a mixed marriage, listen and think of how you should behave if you were.

First, let us be very clear on one thing. Like citizenship under an unjust government, and like slavery, mixed marriage is not a good state in which to live. God did not intend families to be divided in their religious loyalty. Not only individuals, but houses are to serve the Lord. Joshua challenged Israel by commanding, “Choose you this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” In the New Testament, God converts households, and households are baptized together (with their babies, of course), and in those events, the head of the household, the husband and father declares, in effect, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” God wants families, not just individuals, to serve him, to testify to him. That is the supreme purpose of a family, to obey God’s commands and to bear witness of his grace.

This is why it is terribly abnormal for a family to be mixed in its religious commitment. It is so abnormal that the God who, as he says, hates divorce, required his people in the Old Testament to divorce their foreign, unbelieving spouses. That’s not the case in the New Testament. In the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says that if you are in a mixed marriage, stay in it and bear witness, unless the unbeliever wants to leave. More on that later. But even in the New Testament, God says plainly to his people that they are to marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39). And in 2 Corinthians 6:14 there is this passage:

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.”

I don’t see how God could have made it any clearer. A Christian must not marry a non-Christian.

And let’s make this clear: a non-Christian is anyone who does not confess from the heart Jesus Christ as his own Lord and savior, trusting Jesus alone for

salvation and seeking above all to obey his word. When we say “Christian,” we are not merely talking about people who were baptized years ago, or who attend some church, or who tolerate discussions of religion in their presence. A Christian is one who loves Jesus Christ and who seeks to put his relation to Christ ahead of all other joys and responsibilities.

Singles, young people: please understand this. So many people have undergone enormous grief from marrying someone who was not a disciple of Jesus. Before marriage, you don’t understand what that grief is like; afterward, you do. I know how it is; I’ve heard teenagers say, “Oh, the Christian kids are so dull — they aren’t really ‘with it.’ I want to have fun.” That kind of talk leads to dating unbelievers, marrying unbelievers, and in time — if the Christian kid really loves Jesus — it leads to great grief.

There are grave dangers even in dating non-Christians because dating, however casual, can lead to love, and love as we know can lead to marriage. Or to put it more sharply, dating can lead to sexual temptation, and sexual temptation indulged can make marriage seem almost necessary. I don’t think that even pregnancy should lead a Christian to marry a non-Christian; but it often puts the believer in a position of having to make a very hard decision. The best advice is just to avoid that whole problem. If you must date (and in my view the whole concept of dating needs reexamination), date only other believers.

But now, what if you are married to an unbeliever? Often that happens and it’s not anybody’s fault. Sometimes two non-Christians will marry, and one will be converted to Jesus Christ but not the other. Then you have a mixed marriage. It’s not anybody’s fault; it’s just there. What do we do with it?

In Peter’s example, the wife is the believer, the husband the unbeliever. For some reason, that seems to be the case more often than the opposite. Essentially, what Peter says is that her job is simply to be a good Christian wife. There is no essential difference between her duties and the duties of a wife with Christian husband. But she has an additional reason for being a model Christian wife: by following God’s pattern for marriage, she may win her husband to the Lord. Marital evangelism. Understand: do not marry someone in order to evangelize him; but if you are married to a non-Christian, your behavior can lead him to Christ.

I say “behavior,” rather than “talk;” for that is Peter’s emphasis. In verse 1, the husband does not believe the word of God, but that’s not the end of the matter. He may be won over “without words” by the *behavior* of his wife. The passage isn’t saying that the wife must be absolutely silent, although I gather from later in

this passage and elsewhere in Scripture that the ideal woman is a gentle and *quiet* spirit. It's saying that even if he won't listen to the word of God — from her or from elsewhere — there is an alternative way of reaching him. That way is her example. She shows him what God can do in someone's life. For one thing, she shows that she is submissive to her husband. Submissive even to the point of unjust suffering. This does not mean that she violates her Christian conscience for his sake. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, Peter's example in verse 5, did what was *right*. It does mean that she shows her husband proper respect. Sarah called Abraham her lord. And it also means that when her husband asks her to do something, even something unpleasant, and it does not violate her conscience, she will do it without complaining.

Further, verse 2: he sees the purity and reverence of his wife. She is not like the world. Her language, her interests, her preoccupations are not those of the unbelieving world. She loves Jesus, her husband and her children. Her moral standards and her personal integrity are beyond reproach. She is not one of the crowd, constantly seeking new pleasures, new things, new symbols of status. She is not a fanatic about physical beauty, new clothes, new adornments. Indeed, she doesn't need those things because her beauty is a beauty of the heart, "the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" (3:4). I'm tempted to use some illustrations here, but I don't want to embarrass anybody. We know women like that, don't we? And we also know the other kind. Ladies, ask yourself which you are.

This is not a feminist text, is it? I don't apologize for that — God knows some things about us that the feminists don't know at all. But if Peter's picture of the Christian wife looks to you like the old stereotype of the weak and helpless woman, look again at verse 6: "You are [Sarah's] daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear." Living under the constant threat of unjust suffering can be a scary business. We are just beginning now to get a reliable picture of the extent of spouse abuse in the world today. When a woman is physically abused by her husband and cannot achieve reconciliation, she has a right to leave the household temporarily until she and the children are reasonably assured of their safety. Sometimes, women in this position are justified in being fearful. Fear is not always wrong. But sometimes fear leads us to do the wrong thing, to disobey the Lord. Sometimes in marriage, it leads us to go along with the crowd, to be what our spouse wants instead of what God wants. Sometimes it leads us to follow our friends into the mad pursuit of physical beauty and pleasure. It takes real courage to stand against that. The weak and helpless woman of the old stereotype won't do it. The godly woman will, for the godly woman is *strong*. Not noisy, demanding, nagging, insisting on her own way — not that kind of strong — but morally strong, able to go against the crowd, against fashion, against materialism; able to be Jesus'

kind of woman even under threat. It takes a strong woman to do those things, and it's that kind of strength that's needed in a mixed marriage, and therefore in all marriages. It's that kind of strength that can turn a mixed marriage into a Christian marriage.

Is that hard to believe? Is it impossible for you to believe that the simplicity of strong, consistent, godly moral standards, and a submissive, quiet spirit can win *your* unbelieving husband to Christ? Believe it, and trust God.

Now, what if you are the husband of a non-Christian wife? Peter doesn't say much to you specifically. There is verse seven, in which he speaks to all husbands, and again I think Peter would tell us that the task of a husband in a mixed marriage is essentially the same as the task of all husbands.

What is the task of all husbands? Paul starts in Ephesians 5 by saying, "Husbands, love your wives." Peter, interestingly, takes a different approach: "Live with your wives considerately" (NIV) or "according to knowledge" (Greek). Knowledge and love are closely related in the Bible. Basically, you can't love someone very well without understanding, knowing that person. And that's a big problem that we have, isn't it men? Understanding women. We men joke about how hard it is. Women also remark often about how men don't understand them. We need to take more time to know our partner, to see her strengths and weaknesses, to see where she needs our help. In some obvious ways, women are weaker than men; sorry, feminists, but that's what Peter says. And we men ought to be ready to bear more of the burden. At the same time, we are to respect them. In a Christian marriage, the husband should respect his wife as joint heir of the grace of life in Jesus Christ. In a mixed marriage, too, there is a place for respect. The husband should respect his wife as a fellow creature of God, a bearer of God's image.

Interestingly, Peter tells husbands to behave this way so that "nothing will hinder your prayers." Do you feel that your prayers are powerful before God? Or do they often seem to bounce back off the ceiling? It could be, odd as the connection might seem, that you need to rethink your relationship with your wife. It may be that your prayers are hindered because you haven't taken the trouble to know, to help and to respect your wife.

I think we can deduce from the structure of Peter's thinking here that if a Christian husband is married to a non-Christian wife, his duty is simply to behave as a good Christian husband: to love, to understand, to help, to respect. Just as in the reverse case, behavior honoring to God will have an evangelistic power. A

husband like this will be a powerful witness to his wife of what God can do in a life. His prayers for her will be powerful prayers.

Mixed marriage is often a difficult situation. There is suffering for the Christian, often unjust suffering. But for the Christian who seeks to obey God rather than to complain about his troubles or to demand his/her rights, the mixed marriage can be a wonderful arena to see the grace of God at work. If you want to take this path, but you don't know what first steps to take, talk to your pastor or elders, or to a good Christian counselor that can take you through the practical steps and hold you accountable. We all need this kind of help at one time or other; don't be ashamed to ask for it.

Indeed, God calls all of us, whatever kind of family we may be in, to ask what new steps of obedience we can take day by day, so that our suffering, as well as our triumphs, will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ.