

Winning While One-Down
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1 Peter 3:1-7

3 Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. 3 Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; 4 rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight. 5 It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. 6 Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

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

Have you ever heard the expression, “getting one-upped” by someone? It's the experience of someone finding a way to show that they are just a little *better* than you. Maybe they make sure they give gifts that definitely more expensive than you can afford to give. Or they always seem to work their prestigious university or advanced degree into every conversation. When a supervisor says, “Hey, I'm the boss, remember?” or a parent tells a child, “Because I said so!” that are asserting that they are in a one-up position. When someone one-ups me, I'm onedown.

What happens inside of you when you feel one-down?

What emotions come up?

Shame or embarrassment or even humiliation
Maybe resentment or even anger

Where do you feel it in your body?

Tightening of the chest
Feeling sick to your stomach
Or maybe face gets hot and flushed.

What is your go-to response to that feeling?

Want to get out of there, or hide/become invisible, or try to retaliate

In a culture obsessed with status, people who are one-down are seen as losers.

Peter's letter is addressed to churches in which everyone is made to feel like a loser relative to the dominate culture, even the free men. It would be tempting for them to want to stay one-up on their wives and slaves when they are one-down to everyone else.

In speaking to everyone in the community, regardless of their status, Peter wants them understand:

Those who are one-down are precious to God, worthy of special honor.

People who are one-down can change the world from the bottom-up, just as Jesus did.

When can win people to Christ while being one-down.

Before we go any further, it needs be acknowledged that this text has been so misunderstood and misused that even talking about it can give us the heebie-jeebies. We hear Peter say "wives, submit to the authority of your husbands" and we think he is trying to preserve the patriarchy. We hear him say that wives shouldn't braid their hair or wear ornamentation and we think he wants women marginalized and ignored. We hear him say that women should be like Sarah who obeyed Abraham and called him lord and we wonder, "Peter have you even READ Genesis? Abraham was far from a perfect husband. And it's not like Sarah had a lot of options." We hear Peter refer to women as the "weaker" sex and we conclude that he is just buying into stereotypes and believes that women are fundamentally inferior.

These knee-jerk reactions are understandable. The way these texts have been crudely interpreted and irresponsibly misused in American Christianity mean that when we hear this passage it is like nails across the proverbial chalkboard.

But now that we are halfway through this letter, I hope we can see that Peter has zero interest in preserving the status quo. Peter is taking a very familiar literary genre – household codes – and he is flipping them on their head. The most famous household codes were the ones written by Aristotle intended to instruct heads of household on how to be in charge. Peter is teaching everyone in the household how to be in service – including masters and husbands. When Peter tells wives to submit "in the same way" that slaves do, we need to remember that he immediately follows that up by telling husbands "in the same way" to be considerate to their wives as equally co-heirs of God's inheritance. Husbands should take their cues from wives, who in turn are taking cues from slaves, who in turn have taken their cues from Jesus himself how voluntarily submitted himself to God in order to accomplish our salvation.

The people who are one-down from us are not our lessers. They are our teachers.

In each and every social circumstance, Peter is calling upon people to NOT do what people in a one-down position instinctively do – namely, retaliate against being made to feel ashamed, humiliated, and one-down. That is only going to create more trouble for you, Peter says. "Sticking it to the man" won't tear down the patriarchy. It won't change the system. Voluntarily

submitting to human authority – even unjust and unethical authority – reflects Jesus and bears silent witness to Christ's more excellent kingdom.

That is why Peter urges wives to:

- Voluntarily submit, even to non-Christian husbands, so your Christ-like character may win him over;
- Let the inner confidence and beauty that comes with knowing yourself to be a chosen daughter of God speak for itself; and
- Look to the notable women in our tradition as examples of how faithful living leads to blessings that last for generations to come.

And then he urges husbands to show considerate care toward their wives, treating them not as possessions but as partners. They share equally in life with you now. They will share equally in God's inheritance in the life to come. Peter even includes a promise with a warning: If you pay honor to your wife in recognition of her vulnerable position in the world, then God will hear your prayers. If you don't, God won't.

Those in a "one-down" position are deserving of greater consideration and respect as our teachers in the way of Christ and as our spiritual equals before God. So my challenge for you this week:

Notice someone in a vulnerable position relative to others – especially you yourself. Take note of at least three ways they remind you of the character of Christ in the way they move through the world.

Examples:

- A server or busser at a restaurant – anyone who depends on strangers to earn a wage
- An aging parent who can't get along without assistance
- Anyone who depends on you for your expertise, or your influence, or your protection.

Hopefully you have gotten the idea that this text has something to say to everyone, not just married people. And maybe the most important take-away for all of us is that **everybody finds themselves in a one-down position sooner or later.**

When we do, we have a choice to make. We can see that as a crisis and do everything in our power to get one-up again, or we can see it as an opportunity to be like Jesus. Jesus knew where he came from, but never lorded it over others. Jesus knew what power he had, yet he never used to put someone else down. Jesus knew who he was, so he never got hooked when other people tried to one-up him.

Jesus chose to live one-down. When we do the same, we help repair the world.

Let us pray.