

Dr. David deSilva, The Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 6, Reading 1 Peter attuned to Kinship Structures and Values

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This is Dr. David deSilva in his teaching on The Cultural World of the New Testament. This is session 6, Reading 1 Peter Attuned to Kinship Structures and Values.

In this session, we'll look closely at 1 Peter using what we've learned in regard to kinship, the formation of kinship groups, and the ethos of kinship groups, as well as the kind of rules that govern natural households in our previous lecture to see in what ways this might illumine the rhetorical strategy, the pastoral strategy of 1 Peter as the author addresses the situation of those here.

Now, we've already explored the pastoral setting of 1 Peter in connection with the segments on honor and shame. Peter is writing to a group of congregations throughout, say, the western half of modern Turkey, five provinces, Roman provinces in what is now western Turkey, and Peter identifies the most pressing problem facing these Christians to be the resistance they have met with from their non-Christian neighbors who have used all the shaming techniques at their disposal, insult, reproach, even, in some cases, physical abuse, marginalization, to try to win the converts back to the normal way of life and values that they had left behind. Now, what we'll find is that kinship language, alongside considerations of honor and shame, also plays a significant role in the author's response to the addressee's plight.

First, the author gives attention both to the fact and the manner of a new birth into a new family that the converts to Christianity have experienced. He will also point out the distance that this new birth into a new family imposes between the believers, the converts, and the natural kinship groups that, conceptually at least, they've left behind. So even from the very beginning of his letter, we read, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.' Very similarly, toward the end of the first chapter, he writes about them, "You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God. For," quoting now from Isaiah, "all flesh is like grass, and all its glory is like the flower of grass. The grass withers, the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.

And this word is the good news that was preached to you." Peter is talking about the act of receiving the word of the gospel and responding in trust to it as, in effect, a second begetting. That word was the implanted seed that creates a new person, a new birth into a new family, and a family that is better in every way than the family that, in so many cases, these converts have had to leave behind, in some sense. It creates a new kinship group among those who share this new birth and this common parentage.

The Christian group becomes a brotherhood, a term that shows up in 2:17 and 5:9. The new birth into this new family brings great advantage and privilege, a greater privilege than the hearer's natural births. It is brought about by a superior seed, not the kind of seed that bestows only mortal life but that which bestows unfading, eternal life. It is a birth into a family that shares a greater inheritance, namely the glory and the honor that belongs to the one God, the head of this household, and God's Messiah, to be enjoyed forever in a life beyond corruptibility.

The hearer's first birth, their natural birth into a natural kinship group, brought one kind of inheritance to them. It was an inheritance of ignorance, of godless traditions, of values that were born from alienation from the one God. The author speaks thus about that.

You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your natural forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. The new birth into the new household of God, by contrast, provides these harassed Christians not only with a better inheritance to which to look forward to, but also with a strong affirmation of their honor as a result of hearing and responding to the word that was preached to them. On the one hand, they may have lost honor or status such as their natural birth had given them, but now because of that, or as a consequence of that, they share in the honor not merely of natural parents but the honor of the God of the cosmos who has become, or who is the head of the family into which they have become a part.

This new birth into a new family has particular ethical implications. According to the author, the first implication is that the convert must grow into the likeness of his or her new parent. We read in 1 Peter 1:14 to 16, as obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, you shall be holy, for I am holy.

A key text from Leviticus, be holy as I am holy, is here combined with the image of children allowing their parents to shape and mold them into the likeness of the parent's character. Knowing the character of our Father should further urge us in this process. The author writes in the very next verse, if you call on him as Father, the

one who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.

A second ethical implication alongside growing to the likeness of the character of our new father concerns the believer's relationships one with another. The believers, the author writes, have purified their hearts for the purpose of expressing sincere brotherly love. The Greek word there is *philadelphia*, the very same term that Plutarch uses in his treatise on brotherly love.

What kind of love should characterize siblings? And the author urges them to exhibit love of the sisters and brothers, to be *philadelphoi* people, to be people who exhibit the love of siblings among each other. We can recognize several facets of the larger cultural ethic guiding sibling relationships, the ethic of *philadelphia*, in this author's description of interactions within the Christian community. Here, I'll just take us through several slides of scripture readings.

For example, in 1:22, the author writes, love one another earnestly from a pure heart. And then in 2:17, love the brotherhood. In 4:8, he looks to that facet of the ethos where love overcomes injuries, which is to mark kinship relationships.

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly since love covers a multitude of sins. Between non-kin members, affronts and insults should provoke retaliation. But among kin, insults, and injuries should be met with forbearance, with love that covers over and sets aside rather than responds to and multiplies interpersonal affronts.

He urges them to put away all malice and all deceit and all play-acting hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Deceit, pretense, envy, these things characterize competitors in the ancient world, not those who cooperate for one another's common good. Slander is appropriate for competitors for honor, but kin protect rather than tear down one another's honor.

The author also urges them to have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind in 3.8. Again, we find here a list of qualities particularly resonant with the harmony and the unity that is to characterize siblings in the ancient world. The author, like the entire Christian movement in the first century, knows that the meeting of the Christian assembly depends upon hospitality, upon Christians opening their homes, their physical homes, to one another and welcoming them in. So, he urges them to show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Hospitality was essential to the Christian movement, from the meeting of the group to the support of missionaries and teachers to the support of Christian delegates from other churches. Without hospitality, the Christian group would have had no social location wherein to meet or support the growing network of churches. A

classicist named Edwin Hatch gives us this very fine picture of the Christian group, kind of Mediterranean-wide in the first century.

Strangers passed in a constant stream through the cities of all the great routes of commerce in both East and West. Every one of those strangers who bore the Christian name had therein a claim to hospitality. Christianity was and grew because it was a great fraternity.

The name brother vividly expresses a real fact. A Christian found wherever he went in the community of his fellow Christians, a welcome and hospitality. Author 1 Peter contributes to this kind of culture that the classicist is later able to write about.

This culture is one in which strangers are brought together. People who are related to one another in, for the most part, no way are brought together into a community that voluntarily accepts toward one another the obligations of the family at the closest level. And this becomes, at least in the eyes of this classicist, Edwin Hatch, one of the fundamental reasons for the growth of the Christian movement in the ancient world.

Now, alongside that, there's also the fact that natural households convert to Christianity as groups. We find, for example, throughout the New Testament, how the conversion of the head of a household leads to or encompasses the conversion of the entire natural household of which he is the father, husband, and master. This is the case for Cornelius the centurion in Acts chapter 10.

Also, the Philippian jailer is mentioned in Acts chapter 16. And we find it reflected in Stephanus of Corinth, who converted with his whole household. And also Onesiphorus in 2 Timothy.

The movement, the early Christian movement, depended upon heads of households like this, who inevitably brought in their whole households to the church by virtue of being the head of that household, and the willingness of Christian householders like these aforementioned people to extend hospitality. And this natural Christian household became the setting for the household codes, as they're known, found in Ephesians 5 and 6, or Colossians 3, just dovetailing into chapter 4, and the household codes that we find in 1 Peter in chapters 2 and 3. With their blend of, on the one hand, reinforcing traditional roles within the natural household but also, on the other hand, introducing sometimes subversive Christian rationales that shaped and reshaped roles and behaviors within these natural Christian households. 1 Peter, unlike Ephesians and Colossians, focuses only on a few of the roles, only on slaves, wives, and husbands.

He doesn't talk about children and parents. He doesn't talk about masters of slaves. And it seems that he largely has non-Christian households in view when he's addressing slaves and wives.

Let's look first at his instructions to Christian wives. In chapter 3, verses 1 through 6, we read, 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, 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.

For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him Lord. And you are her children if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening. In this text, we see some of aspects of the classical and the Jewish ideal of the wife.

We see the ideal of submissiveness, being subject to your own husbands, in 3:1. Let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, submissiveness, silence, in 3:4. And also he example of Sarah, as a representative of the holy women who hoped in God, adorning themselves by submitting to their own husbands, even as Sarah called Abraham Lord, in 3:5 and 6. We often see, even more directly, the facet of silence within that ideal, as the author says, do this so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives. The author appears here to be urging Christian wives of non-Christian husbands to live out the non-Christian husband's ideal of the good wife as a means of evangelism and, at the very least, as a means of winning respect for the Christian confession and way of life. And then in 3:6, kind of moving in a new direction, he writes, and you are her children, you are Sarah's children, if you do good, and do not fear anything that is frightening.

That is perhaps not the best translation of this, and I do not fear any intimidation might be a better translation. On the one hand, the author is here speaking again of a fictive kinship in the form of shared descent from Sarah. And I should just mention, for clarity's sake, 1 Peter is not addressed primarily to Jewish Christians but primarily to Gentile Christians because the author talks about their past as a past marked by idolatry, fornication, and a whole bunch of other things that Jews just didn't do, but Gentiles did every day.

Well, not the fornication part, but the idolatry part, at least, as a matter of course. So, here, the author applies fictive kinship. You have become Sarah's daughter if you do good and don't fear any intimidation.

We might also recall how a different author, Paul, gave a great deal of attention to demonstrating how Christians, both Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, are connected to the lineage and thus to the promises of Abraham and Sarah in Galatians and Romans. But there's another dynamic here: do not fear any intimidation. That is the dynamic of resisting, not submitting, but resisting the non-Christian husband on certain unavoidable points, and that would be the point of domestic religion. Choosing a religion other than one's husband's religion was an act against the cultural ideal.

Plutarch writes in his *Advice on Marriage* that a wife ought not to have friends of her own but use her husband's friends as their common stock. And the first and most important of our friends are the gods. A married woman should, therefore, worship and recognize the gods whom her husband holds dear, and these alone.

The door must be closed to strange cults and foreign superstition. No god takes pleasure in a cult performed furtively and in secret by a woman. The wife of a non-Christian husband who converted to the Christian faith would be straining the solidarity of the household by choosing to worship a god other than her husband's, the head of the household's gods.

If she were serious about avoiding idolatry and serious about her commitment to worshipping the one god alone, she would not participate in domestic rituals. The wife of a household would be visibly taciturn or even absent while the head of the household, the husband, performed domestic cult. And I should just say, all the evidence that I've seen, at least, I was about to say we have, but I don't know, but all the evidence that I've seen of ancient houses, in at least the Roman world, prominently include shrines, domestic shrines, where the genius, the spirit of the family, the protective spirits, the lares of the family, would be worshiped alongside other gods that presumably the husband placed there and decided would be there.

And these shrines, I mean, every Roman house had an altar, in effect. It had a place for domestic religion. And the wife, now, would be avoiding that place, causing a lot of friction in the household at that point.

She would not go with her husband to participate in civic and public rituals. She would not be seen as a pious wife by all of her husband's friends and associates. And, perhaps most objectionably, she would be leaving the house to gather with a group of strangers, of people outside her husband's circles and without her husband's supervision, if she went to gather with the Christian assembly.

Now, the author regards submission in this area to be not negotiable. You owe God more obedience than you owe the husband. But the author is urging the Christian wife to act in every other aspect of life so as to demonstrate that her allegiance to

Jesus really overall makes her a better, more pleasing wife if the husband is tolerant of her strange religious practice.

Not fearing any intimidation also suggests that the author recognizes that the non-Christian husband can exert significant pressure and even threaten the Christian wife to cease and desist. But in these instances, one cannot submit to a human being rather than God. Now, right after this, the author turns to address words to Christian husbands, and obviously only to Christian husbands, because non-Christian husbands wouldn't listen to Peter, and what he says wouldn't apply.

Now, as I mentioned more briefly in an earlier lecture, there is a problem with translating 3:7 accurately. In the ESV and the NIV, we find this translation, 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. And then in the NIV, 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.

Now, what we might notice in all of these translations, you could compare the KJV, RSV, and others, is that two injunctions are being given, live considerably with your wife, show honor to your wife, and two motives are being adduced, in effect, because your wife is the weaker vessel, and because your wife is a fellow heir of the gift of life, the life that God gives. All of these translations present command number one, then they present command number two and suggest that both motivations relate to command number two. But this is, to my eyes, rather obviously counter to the structure of the Greek itself, where we have husbands being addressed, told to do action number one on the basis of motivation number one and to do action number two on the basis of motivation number two.

So really, as I read the Greek, it is husbands also live together considerably with your wives, as with the more fragile feminine vessel, and show them honor as fellow heirs with you of the gift of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. My point here is that showing honor to the Christian wife is not presented by the author as a magnanimous gesture on the part of the Christian husband toward the weaker vessel. Rather, such respect is her due by virtue of what God has made her along with the husband, namely, fellow heirs of God's gift of eternal life.

Now, while classical ethicists would have recognized and agreed with the first instruction and its motivation, husbands should be considerate because their wives are physically weaker and more vulnerable than they are. While classical ethicists would have agreed with that, the second instruction and its motivation constitute a distinctively Christian turn on the husband-wife relationship. In fact, being fellow

heirs recalls the sibling relationship into which the Christian husband and wife have also entered by virtue of being born into God's family.

So, in a way, the inevitably hierarchical relationship of husband and wife in the ancient world is being challenged, reshaped somewhat by the more egalitarian relationship of siblings in the ancient world, fellow children of the same parents. And this is the author's final word on Christian marriage. I'm not saying this solves any debates easily, but I am saying that the author doesn't just mimic classical or Jewish codes and values about marriage.

He notices that by virtue of having become Christians together, the dynamics of marriage have something new interjected into them, and this will work to leaven and change that relationship in some way. Now we turn to 1 Peter's instructions to slaves, which we find in chapter 2, verses 18 through 21. He writes, servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.

For this is a gracious thing when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it, you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this, you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

Now in this passage, the author uses the word *oiketai*, household servants. He's assuming domestic slaves, such as are typically found in urban environments, and this is appropriate to the way the early church spread. He also is writing here essentially assuming that he's addressing slaves in non-Christian homes since there are no reciprocal instructions given to masters and since the author does not seem to feel he has any leverage on the masters to address them to be good instead of crooked and perverse masters.

Slaves in these non-Christian homes would, like the wives of non-Christian husbands, but even more egregiously, would be acting against the norm by not participating in the idolatrous rites of the household and would need to win some tolerance from their masters even for attending Christian gatherings. The author urges slaves then to continue to be submissive and obedient in all matters in which they can with a good conscience, in part to give assurance that the Christian movement is not subversive of the backbone of the Roman imperial economy, i.e. slavery, but also in part to gain the necessary favor from their masters to participate in the Christian movement. Even in this venture, however, the author ascribes a great deal of authority to the slaves' consciences in 2.19. They are to determine on the basis of their Christian discipleship what it means to sin and what it means to do good.

When am I being punished justly? When am I being punished unjustly? The author is giving the slave the moral determination to decide when he or she is acting in line with God's values and not, and therefore, whether the master is acting in line with God's values or not. Moreover, when the author affirms that these Christian slaves should accept punishment for doing what is good, he is actually affirming a measure of insubordination. Most likely, he has in mind their abstinence from idolatry in the household and anything else where their loyalty to God must lead them to disobey their masters.

He expresses the expectation that they will continue to obey God rather than their masters and, therefore, continue to be punished for doing what is good. But this assumes a measure of ongoing insubordination as the final allegiance must be given to God. These slaves' masters, in turn, are now judged in part by how they treat their slaves.

Namely, if they indeed punish their slaves for doing good in the sight of the one God, these masters prove themselves wicked or crooked masters since they are acting unjustly. Within 1 Peter, the instructions that are given to the slaves end up providing the model for the instructions given to all. This is quite surprising in this society.

The slave is not an exemplary citizen and is not the go-to place for a model of behavior. But here, Peter holds up the slave, really, as the model for every Christian. And so, we find not only the slave but all Christians being urged to accept undeserved suffering in the awareness of having God's approval while taking care not to provoke deserved suffering on the part of slaves from their masters, on the part of every Christian from the outside world.

Both slaves, first and then every Christian, are urged not to retaliate. First, slaves, but then every Christian is made aware of the importance of following Jesus' example. And then, first, slaves are called to entrust their cause to God for judgment.

And then, two short chapters later, all Christians who are suffering unjustly because they have responded obediently to God are urged to entrust their cause to God for judgment. On the one hand, 1 Peter is hardly a liberationist text, either in regard to the view and role of wives in the household or the view and role of slaves in the household. But on the other hand, the author shows some interesting challenges or poses some interesting challenges to these unequal structures and to the hearer's thinking about the structures themselves.

As a Christian husband in the first century, am I going to relate to the woman in my house primarily as a husband to a wife or a brother to a sister under God? Thinking about the slaves in the midst of the assembly, am I going to continue to think of them as kind of the lowest members of the church or, in so many important ways,

the exemplary members of the church? So, the author may provide some interesting counterpoints for both scores. Now, the idea of the church, the Christian movement as a family, as a kinship group brought together by means of adoption into God's family such that they become sisters and brothers one to another, and the ethic that accompanies this idea are powerful resources for the transformation of the individual believer and for the formation of vital nurturing communities of faith if we work to recover them in our age. When I think of the churches of which I've been a part, they're generally, generally, very cordial groups of people who interact well and even intimately to a certain extent, but not beyond certain points.

But I could only describe one of the seven churches of which I've been a meaningful part of my life really as a family, as a group that went out of its way to live out this ideal of kinship based on being related by the blood of Christ as opposed to being related by any other blood. What if our churches, what if we as part of our churches really kept pushing in the direction of treating our fellow Christians, our brothers and sisters there, really as brothers and sisters, not just as a kind of religious title, but as people in whom we would invest ourselves as if they were the sons and daughters of our parents, of our very natural parents? What if, for example, the single mother came into a church and found there a community of support to help her raise and look after her children while she worked? What would the family of God mean to such a person when she found she could really entrust her children during the day to the care of others when she found scores of people willing to help her in the day-to-day challenges of having to be the sole parent and the sole breadwinner? What if those two feuding church members and you all know exactly who I mean, what if those two feuding church members in our congregation found us coming alongside them the same way that inevitably, I think, it's been my experience, inevitably we come around members of our natural family that have been bickering for too long. You know, I've done this, we've all done this, it's been done to me, where our natural families, some members of our natural families will in effect sit us down and say, now this cannot continue.

We are going to iron out these issues so that we can be a well-functioning family again and put this disunity aside. What if the person who gets found out in a sin finds that the Christians in the church around him or her are more interested in restoring that person, in trying to actually hide that person's shame rather than parade that person's shame and kick the person out or make the person feel unworthy and unclean? What if we treated that person the way we would treat, I hope, the member of our natural kinship group who got into trouble, who messed up, with the same fervor for restoring and helping and raising up? What kind of powerful culture, what kind of winsome, attractive culture would the Christian church become? And what if we thought about the church in these terms beyond even our local congregation, beyond even our denomination, beyond even our national borders? What if those who even now are facing tremendous hardship because of their commitment to Christ find the global church as quick to come alongside them, to

supply them with any material or spiritual assistance possible, to take up their cause as if it's their very own, with the same fervor that we would if our child was being persecuted or was being marginalized? I think this is very much the kind of ethos that the writers of the New Testament very much wanted to inculcate in the Christian movement, as they made us think of each other as sisters and brothers and not merely strangers who belong to the same voluntary organization. And the more we're able to embody this ethos of love, the more I think the witness of the church, the perseverance of the church, and the growth of the church will be nurtured.

I'm reminded, and I wish I could remember exactly the classical text in which I found it, but one of the things that most impressed the non-Christian outsiders about the Christian movement in the second and third centuries was the way they treated each other was the inordinate love and acceptance that they extended to one another. The testimony is to see how they love one another. That could be said of the church in every place again if we were to embrace our kinship, one at the cost of Jesus dying for us to make us a family of God.

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