

The Weaker Vessel: Women and Wives in 1 Peter

One passage in 1 Peter instructs men to show consideration to their wives, “paying honor to the woman as to the weaker sex” (3:7). Such language may strike modern readers as quaint or ill-advised. Peter’s intentions may be noble, but most women do not like being referred to as “the weaker sex.” In the ancient world, of course, such inferiority could be, and often was, stated without controversy. Plato declares, “A woman is weaker than a man” (*Republic* 5.455D).

The expression used in 3:7 literally means “the weaker vessel.” The word vessel (*skeuos*) comes from pottery (cf. 2 Cor. 4:7; 1 Thess. 4:4). Peter’s point seems to be that men and women are like clay jars that hold God’s precious gift of life: both are fragile, but the female vessel tends to be even more frail. The only point of comparison seems to be physical strength, since the preceding verses (3:1–2) indicate that wives may be stronger than their husbands in other ways (e.g., spiritually or intellectually or morally). Of course, healthy women sometimes are physically stronger than less healthy men, but the basic point seems to be that men should typically be courteous and considerate of women with regard to workload and other matters that could strain or damage the physical body.

In a broader sense, the reference may be applied to “social power.” Within Roman society, men had certain rights and privileges that women did not. Peter may have been noting that men, who often are physically stronger than women, also possess more power. Given this situation (which he neither blesses nor critiques), he urges men to “show consideration” to women and to “honor” them as joint heirs of God’s grace. In other words, men are to yield power to women, granting them an equality in Christ that is not recognized by society at large (cf. Gal. 3:28).