

Make the Most of Marriage

Ephesians 5:22-33

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In Christ Jesus, who dearly loves and cares for His bride, the Church, dear fellow Christians:

“Will you take this woman here present to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health, to love and to cherish until death you do part?” “I do,” the groom says. “I do,” the bride also responds. And with those few words a marriage begins. At first, everything is perfect. In the couple’s eyes their spouse is the most wonderful person who ever walked the face of the earth. The future looks bright. The potential seems limitless.

But then what happens? Over months or years, habits become annoyances rather than endearing quirks. Plans fall through. Goals go unmet. There are problems at work and stress at home. Each spouse blames the other, and they both blame God. The only solution in their minds is to file for divorce and end the marriage. But even with that the bitterness and scars may linger for a lifetime.

Even in marriages that last husbands and wives can become disillusioned because the relationship is not what they had hoped it would be or is not what it used to be. It has led many to conclude that marriage is broken and beyond repair, that it is time to leave it behind as an old historical artifact and move on to a new lifestyle pattern.

So if you are a young person with your whole adult future ahead of you, do you look forward to marriage and ask the Lord to lead you to a husband or wife according to His will? Or should you avoid marriage because all it brings is heartache? If you are already married, are there aspects of the relationship that are less than ideal? Can those problem areas be improved, or do you just have to resign yourself to the way things are and put up with them because marriage can't get any better?

Is there hope? Yes, there is! What we need to know first of all is that the problem is not with God or even with marriage. Marriage isn't broken. There is no design flaw in it. God made it to be a blessing. It was not good that the first man Adam should be alone so the Lord in love made Eve from Adam's rib. She was to be a helper suitable for him. The original Hebrew term conveys God's intention for Eve to be a complement to Adam, someone who would make him complete. In marriage God made them one like two pieces of a puzzle which fit together perfectly to form one whole. Together they could better care for the Garden of Eden, be

each other's closest companion and confidant, enjoy a sexual union, raise a family, and serve God in many other ways.

Marriage is not broken. God still offers those gifts today in marriage. It is one of His greatest earthly blessings, not just for husbands and wives, but for their children and for society as a whole. Marriage and family are the basic building blocks of a stable, peaceful community.

Problems come, not because of marriage itself, but because husbands and wives do not always understand how God intends it to work, or they decide they want to do things their own way. In His love God has given us the marriage relationship, and through Paul's words He explains how He designed it to work and how we can make the most of it.

I.

A couple in pre-marriage classes some years ago stated they had decided that in their relationship everything would be divided equally between them: making money, paying bills, doing chores, and making decisions. They saw their roles as completely interchangeable. It sounds logical, and maybe it works in some business settings. But it is not the way God has designed marriage. Instead, He has given a different, specific role to the husband and another to the wife.

The Lord says to wives, "*Submit to your husbands, as to the Lord.*" [v.22] But speaking about submission can be like

lighting the fuse of a stick of dynamite and watching it blow up in your face. “How dare you say that! How dare you demean women that way!” Human pride perceives submission as meaning that the wife is inferior, less able, and less important than the husband.

But submission simply means that one is willing to be under the authority of another. We do it all the time in everyday life. When you see a teenager wearing an orange vest and standing in the middle of the highway with a stop sign, you stop. You don't question whether the young man is more important than you. He doesn't think about it either. That's not the point. You stop because of the authority he has from the highway department and because you know that it's for your own safety.

Jesus submitted to His Father's will. “*He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant*” (Philippians 2:6f NIV). He said “*the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many*” (Matthew 20:18). He washed the disciples' feet. He gave His life for despicable sinners like us.

God pictures the wife's submission as comparable to our submission to Christ in the Church. We are glad to submit to Jesus. We acknowledge Him as our Head. We need Him. We trust Him. We depend upon Him for salvation and every

other blessing. It would be foolish and harmful to want out of that relationship.

Likewise, making the most of marriage and receiving the full benefit calls for willing submission to the husband's headship, trusting that the Lord's will is best. Peter writes: *“Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands...Your beauty should not come from outward adornment...Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear”* (1 Peter 3:1ff. NIV).

In God's plan the wife has the vital role of servant-helper. With her suggestions, talents, and work, she helps her husband and family serve the Lord in their lives and reach goals which otherwise would be unattainable. Loving submission means she supports her husband's leadership, and even when his plans do not turn out as well as they had hoped she doesn't get caught up in second-guessing or saying, “I told you so.” When the husband is at fault, loving submission calls for forgiving as freely as Christ has forgiven us.

Are you a perfect wife? Do you know of any? Could you ever hope to find one? No, sin has infected everything in the world including marriage. So there are times when submitting seems hard and unrealistic, and grabbing for power and control seems the way to go. But when that happens marriage is not going to be all that God intends. Blessings are forfeited. A certain degree of happiness is lost.

There is hope. Look to the Lord to make the most of marriage. When you recognize the sin of pride or other faults in yourself, take them to the cross in confession. Find peace in God's full pardon and in that pardon look for God's help to fulfill the blessed role he has given you.

II.

The Lord also takes husbands aside to show them how to make the most of marriage in their role. "*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church.*" [v.25] So a husband says, "I do love my wife! What's not to love? She's pretty and attractive. She has a great personality and on top of all that, wow, what a cook! You should taste her meatloaf! No doubt about it, I sure love my wife!"

But that's not the kind of love God is talking about. That husband's love is really just a love for himself. It is all about him and the advantages he receives from his wife. It is a love based on "What can I get out of the relationship?" When he has taken all he wants or all he can get, the love quickly withers away.

Rather, God says, “*Husbands, love your wives, as **Christ loved the church.***” There is no higher standard! Look at Jesus’ love. There was nothing worth loving in us. We were not attractive or beneficial to God in any way. We were dead in sins and God’s enemies. We wanted nothing to do with Him. Yet Jesus was willing to become one of us, humble Himself under God’s law, endure the hatred and persecution of His own people, and finally offer Himself as the sacrificial payment for all our sins against our spouses and God. In love Jesus embraced us as His own and made us His bride through Baptism. He still faithfully cares for us as His body. His love is more than a feeling. It is a determination to do whatever it takes, to make any sacrifice in order to give us every good thing in time and eternity.

“Husbands, love like *that!*” God says. Just as wives are to be servant-helpers, so husbands are to be servant-heads. That love is not going to abuse authority to make life hard for a wife. Peter says, “*Husbands...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*” (1 Peter 3:7 NIV). If you were given a one-of-a-kind crystal goblet would you treat it like the plastic travel mug you picked up at the gas station, knock it around, and leave it on the floor of the car or in the back of the truck until it finally shattered into a million pieces? Hopefully not. The Lord doesn’t want husbands to treat their wives like one of the guys or as cheap, live-in

labor. Christ-like love cherishes the wife as a priceless gift from God to tenderly care for.

It calls for leadership exercised in love, not by force. Paul does not say, “Husbands, *make* your wives submit.” Again, think of how Jesus exercises His headship over us. He doesn’t force His will on us. He draws us with His love. “*We love Him because He first loved us*” (1 John 4:19), not because He’s twisting our arms behind our backs, or because we’re afraid He will beat us up if we don’t.

In addition, since marriage joins husband and wife as one, their lives are so completely intertwined that when a husband shows self-sacrificing love toward his wife he is also caring for himself. The wife’s well-being and happiness are his own. Christ-like love is considerate of feelings. It listens to concerns and suggestions. It changes diapers, does dishes, and takes out trash.

Would the perfect husband please raise his hand and stand up. It’s a pretty small group, isn’t it? There is not a single one. All of us fall woefully short of Christ’s pattern, and so we have missed out on some of the blessings of marriage. But there is hope. Jesus has cleansed us from all those sins. He has made us holy and blameless before Him. He fills our hearts with His love so that we can draw strength from Him to strive toward an always increasing self-giving, self-sacrificing love in our marriages.

It's worth it! Trusted companionship through all life's ups and downs, support for plans and tasks, someone to set the course and take the lead, a wonderful "oneness" with another person—all of these and more are the blessings God has designed into marriage. It is not broken. It is just as much a treasure now as it was when God instituted it in the Garden of Eden.

Regardless of our personal place in life, whether married or not, may we honor marriage as a gift from God. May we thank Him for it and by words of encouragement to others and by faithfully carrying out our own roles as husbands and wives make the most of the gift.

May our marriages be mirror images of that beautiful union between Christ and the Church for the happiness of our families, the good of our communities, and the glory of our Savior-Head, Jesus Christ! Amen.

O God of love, inspire our life,
Reveal Your will in all we do;
Join every husband, every wife
In mutual love and love for You.

[WS 790:3]