

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

***“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the Church, His body, and is Himself its Savior. Now as the Church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her. ... This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church”*** (Ephesians 5:22-25, 32).

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God to consider His Word. Today, God speaks to us about the profound mystery known as marriage.

Now, there are perhaps no set of verses in God’s inerrant Word on the topic of marriage as informative, illuminating and revealing as today’s Epistle text. Likewise, there is perhaps no other set of verses on the topic of marriage as dismissed and as countercultural to our times as today’s Epistle text. Just think about last week’s Gospel text where many said to Jesus: ***“This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”*** ***But Jesus, knowing in Himself that His disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, ‘Do you take offense at this?’”*** (John 6:60-61) – *“Do my words offend you?”*

So, here we find ourselves to what many call a hard saying. A hard saying that we may not want to hear, but what we all need to hear, married and single, alike. So, with open ears and open hearts, let us all hear clearly and hold firmly to what the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to teach us about this profound mystery known as marriage.

The first thing that we must consider is: *what is marriage?* Well, how should we answer that question? Maybe we should consider the source of marriage. And who is this source? The triune God: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Marriage was created by Him. It was not created by man.

From the very beginning, God looked at all that He had created, ***“and God saw that it was good.”*** But there was one thing that was not good, at least not yet. The problem was the man was alone. So, the Lord God said, ***“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him”*** (Genesis 2:18). So, the Lord God created woman and brought her to the man.

***“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”*** (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:31).

God instituted marriage in the Garden of Eden before the Fall into sin (Genesis 2:18-25) as a means to preserve and prosper human life in His good creation. Here, in the Garden of Eden, marriage was created and instituted by God. God created marriage. He loves marriage. He is exceedingly pleased when one man and one woman pledge their love and faithfulness to each other.

So, God gave marriage for the mutual companionship, help, and support of the husband and wife, so that the husband and wife may find delight in one another, and for the procreation of children who are to be brought up in the fear and instruction of the Lord so that they may offer Him their praise.

Since God is the author and designer of marriage, it cannot be redefined by mankind. So, if anyone would attempt to redefine, amend, abbreviate, or adulterate marriage as God has given it has their focus on man’s wants and desires rather than on God’s will for marriage.

So, God is the author and designer of marriage. And despite what earthly princes and our sinful nature may decide, God says what marriage is and what marriage is not.

- **Marriage is** a lifelong union between one man and one woman.
- **Marriage is not** simply a functional agreement between parties – who may or may not love each other. Men and women do not have the authority to refashion marriage into any other shape or form.

As much as the triune God loves marriage, there is one, however, who does not love marriage. He does not rejoice in marriage. He is not pleased when a man and a woman declare their love and faithfulness to each other before God and the world. With his hatred toward marriage, he would tempt Eve to usurp Adam by going against God’s command. Then, her husband, Adam goes along with the temptation. They soon realize their shame and attempt to cover it up. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, get the blame, and rightfully so, but it was Satan who tempted them and ultimately turned them against each other.

You see, Satan hates marriage. And he will do anything he can to undermine marriage as an institution. He uses earthly princes and our sinful nature to undermine marriage through redefining it and disregarding it. But where God has spoken on an issue, we must remember that ***“we must obey God rather than men”*** (Acts 5:29).

For many today, our text is a “hard saying.” As much as we, who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, may not like submission, submission was also countercultural back in Paul’s day. Instead of independence, the ideal is dependence. Servants and masters, children and parents, wives and husbands are in one way or another totally dependent on each other – and to be dependent is better than to be independent, even as it is better to be saved than to be responsible for saving yourself – and certainly fail!

Submission isn’t demeaning. Submission is about God’s order. An employee may be smarter and more honorable than his boss, and yet he is ordered under him, remaining his employee. The same goes with wives and husbands. But the greater burden is on the one who is ordered higher by God. The boss is to provide financial gain to his employee. The husband is to love and care for his wife, even at the expense of his own life. You see, being subordinate isn’t about a ranking of qualities or accomplishments. It is rather about the nature of authority. It is a hierarchy, an ordering of offices, an ordering of our vocation. Jesus follows the will of God the Father, but that doesn’t make Him lower than God the Father, for He and the Father are equal and fully God.

Earthly marriage is similar. God instituted marriage this way so that it would be most harmonious and function with the greatest blessing. In His wisdom, He has delegated headship, or the leadership role, to the husband. Submission on the wife’s part is simply acknowledging that God-given role relationship.

But as much as our text is about earthly marriage, it really isn’t. Recall again: **“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ... Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her. ... This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church”** (Ephesians 5:22-25, 32). Our text is chiefly about Christ and His Bride, the Church. Recall that I said our text is for both married and single people alike. But we can only understand today’s Epistle if we understand how wives and husbands ought to live toward each other.

Just as a wife is to respect her husband, the husband is to sacrifice himself for his wife. This is great marital advice, but Paul says that he is referring to Christ and the Church. You see, God created earthly marriage as a way to better understand Him. Just as the wife submits to her husband, the Church – *you and me* – is to submit to Him. Unfortunately, we live after the Fall. So, there is much strife between wives and husbands, and even between the Church and Christ. To Eve, God said: **“Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you”** (Genesis 3:16b). To Adam, God said: **“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife ... (and not Me) ... cursed is the ground because of you”** (Genesis 3:17).

So, marriages will be rocky from time to time, but God calls all married couples to remain together *“for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.”* This can only be accomplished through love and sacrifice and through forgiveness and reconciliation by following Christ’s example.

Likewise, there is strife between the Church and Christ. We heard about this strife in our Old Testament and Gospel lessons. The Lord said: ***“Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, while their hearts are far from Me, and their fear of Me is a commandment taught by men”*** (Isaiah 29:13). So, just as Satan works to divide wives and husbands, he attempts to do the same with the Church and Christ. Satan leads our sinful hearts into believing that manmade rules, laws, and opinions seem more important than God’s Word. Satan desires the Church to only pay lip service to her Groom. But when you fall short in faithfulness to Christ, the Bridegroom, repent and ask Him for forgiveness.

As much as we continually fail in living up to our God-given marital vocations and in our role as being subordinate to Christ, Jesus says what we would never expect: ***“Behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder”*** (Isaiah 29:14). Despite our sin and unfaithfulness, Jesus continues to nourish and cherish us (Ephesians 5:29).

He gave up His life to save us poor, miserable sinners, His Bride. He purchased the Church for Himself at the price of His lifeblood. He cleansed the Church by the washing with water through the Word. Through the Means of Grace, Word and Sacrament, He cleanses His bride, the Church, of her many transgressions, forgives her sin, quiets her conscience, gives her peace with God, and assures her of security in His protecting hand. But what He has already done is only a small foretaste of that day when He will present His Church as His Bride on the Last Day. On that day, His Bride will be free from stain or wrinkle. She will have no blemish but will be holy and blameless.

This is a profound mystery. The marriage between a husband and a wife is profound as the two become one flesh, but the real mystery is the one-way love of Christ. He redeemed weak and worthless sinners and gathered them together into a Church to be His holy Bride. He is her head; she is His body. So closely are the two – *Christ and the Church* – joined into one. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +