

St. Paul on Marriage

In two of his letters St. Paul affirms the indissolubility of marriage. In neither case is remarriage an acceptable Christian option:

“To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband, but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband – and that the husband should not divorce his wife” (1 Cor 7:10-11).

“Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she remarries another she is not an adulteress” (Rom 7:2-3).

Self-centeredness is frequently the cancer that destroys many marriages. The problem begins when a couple enters marriage with the wrong addition. We learned in school that the sum of $\frac{1}{2}$ plus $\frac{1}{3}$ is not $\frac{2}{5}$. Before the top number can be added the bottom number must be the same. It is called the common denominator. The same is true for the math of marriage. He over his selfish ego plus she over her selfish ego adds up to divorce, disaster and destruction. It never equals one. Because the foundation is defective, the edifice of marriage cannot withstand the storms of married life.

St. Paul presents a very different equation in his letter to the Ephesians 5:21-33. His formula for marital success reads: he over Christ plus she over Christ equals one. Let's examine his teaching in some detail. He introduces his instruction in verse 21 with the command: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Notice how St. Paul places Christ at the center of his discussion. This is vital. Secondly, the charge “be subject to one another” is also important.

If the husband and wife are “subject to” or “submissive to” one another, there can be no question of who is in the power position. St. Paul is fully aware that original sin brought disharmony into marriages. The burning issue for St. Paul is not ruling, but authentic love. Genuine love has two essential qualities: self-sacrifice and commitment. Self-sacrifice requires surrendering my ego and my desires for someone else. Commitment means I will sacrifice myself when it is difficult, even painful. When love is perfect the self-sacrifice is total and the commitment is absolute. This is how Jesus loves. It is how fallen men and women can love in Jesus.

God identified the impact of original sin on married couples when he confronted the perpetrators in the Garden of Eden. He said to Eve: “yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16b). Two ideas can be drawn from this passage. First many women will long for their husband's heart only to have a tyrant instead. Loving is not the strong suit of fallen men. Secondly, many women will engage their husbands in a battle for

control. Submissiveness is not the strong suit of fallen women. Let's examine what St. Paul specifically commands husbands and wives.

The Apostle's instruction to wives is contained in the next three verses:

"Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands" (Eph 5:22-24).

This is a passage that does not set well with many modern women. The suggestion that they should be "subject to" their husbands is likely to bring about a stare that could freeze water at a hundred feet. Yet, St. Paul is not giving a suggestion, but a command. Clearly some explanation is needed. It is clear from verse 21 that submission is equally required of both spouses to each other. Marriage is a relationship of mutual surrender. Therefore the submission St. Paul is commanding is radically different from the obedience of an inferior to a superior, like a child to his parents. The model he uses is also fundamentally different from the thinking of the world. St. Paul is telling wives: "Let go of control, which will only bring about conflict and disorders in your family. Submit lovingly to your husband in the same way you are called to submit lovingly to Christ.

For any women who might think loving this way is easy, I would remark: "You haven't tried it." Submissive love is not difficult; it's impossible! That's the bad news. The good news is Jesus makes it possible through the power of the sacrament of marriage. Wives need to draw down on that potency. It is helpful to reflect that St. Paul is addressing the proper order in a Christian family. Consider the Holy Family. Joseph was the least holy, but he was the head. Jesus was the most holy and he was the most obedient.

St. Paul's instruction to wives does not in any sense negate the gifts of women. Indeed, many women are more gifted than their husbands. Mary was more gifted than Joseph. Her submission to Joseph was a reflection of her submission to her heavenly spouse, the Holy Spirit. She was the willing recipient of the gift of love. She spoke the most feminine words ever uttered: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:34). God established a natural order of love in the family. The husband is the head and the wife is the heart. When this order is violated the marriage suffers and the children become its victims.

St. Paul does not neglect husbands. Indeed, he devotes three times as many verses addressing husbands than he does wives:

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.' This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ

and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Eph 5:25-33).

There is a great deal of richness in this passage. I can only hope to develop some of the important ideas here. The first thing that catches my attention is the Greek word that is translated as “love.” It’s the word the New Testament uses for perfect love. In the Garden of Eden Adam was afraid to risk his life to save Eve from that adulterous intruder, the devil. Husbands, in contrast, are commanded to model Christ who gave up his life for this bride, the Church. “Husbands, love your wives, *as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her*” (Eph 5:25).

Ever since the Fall authentically loving has challenged men. Loving like Christ is simply beyond any man’s natural capacity. Jesus, the faithful husband, set the standard as he uttered the most masculine words ever spoken: “This is my body, which will be given for you” (Lk 22:19). The sacrament of matrimony gives a husband Christ’s power to love as he loved, if he will draw upon it. Many men will admit that loving authentically is a challenge, and that loving the way St. Paul commands here is the greatest challenge of their life.

St. Paul’s quotation of Genesis 2:24 brings in another important idea that deepens our understanding Christian marriage: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.” Here we gain insight into Christ’s insistence on the indissolubility of marriage. Consider the following analogy. If you were to take a half-gallon of red paint and mix it with a half-gallon of white paint, the new oneness is a gallon of pink paint. How do you subsequently divorce the red paint from the white? But there is another idea here.

St. Paul compares the unity between a husband and his wife to the oneness of Christ and the Church, his Mystical Body. This amazing connection is the key to understanding Christian marriage. This is the ideal St. Paul lays before us in the verses we have considered here. What happens when a wife is submissive to her husband as to the Lord and her husband loves her to the degree of daily laying down his life for her? First the children are bathed in an environment of security and love. Secondly, they have before them the daily example of self-sacrificing love. Finally, the radiance of Christ’s love flows out from this domestic church to bring the love of Christ to a love-starved world. One example that rapidly comes to my mind is the marriage of Louis Martin and Zélie-Marie Guérin, the parents of St. Therese of Lisieux. The whole world has been blessed through this marriage.

Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>

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