

Marriage, as a divine institution of the Lord, has taken some pretty serious hits in our country, and indeed over the course of history. The most recent, of course, being the entire issue of homosexual marriage and even the prospect of some Christian churches allowing it. We may want to get up in arms about this and how it's totally destroying this blessing of God, but let's be honest about a few things. First of all, proper marriage, as God instituted and understands it, has survived plenty to get here. As with all good gifts that he gives us, the sinful abuse of it by others does not remove its blessings for those who use and understand it properly. Secondly, there was already plenty of abuse going on with marriage before this came about that frankly, many Christians have grown far too comfortable with and tolerant of. Gay marriage may trip our Offense-O-Meter to the max, but how high do things like casual divorce, extra-marital sex or co-habitation strike us? Maybe they do stir up your conscience and maybe you do label them as "wrong" still, but I'd be willing to put money on the fact that they don't quite raise your ire as much as this latest issue.

I suppose this might come from our tendency to categorize sins into big and little ones or our ability to grow hard and tolerant of consistent sin. But as always with the Lord, there is no distinction. Anything that runs contrary to the loving law he created is sin. All sin is deserving of punishment. If our conscience is not in line, then guess who ought to do the changing? If these sins or any sins do not offend us, we need to sharpen our conscience on God's word so that we can be in line with his good and holy will. So today, let's take a look at the divine union that God has established, and let's take the time to understand our roles in it.

<Read text: Ephesians 5:21-6:4>.

As we become anxious or irate at the secular world on God's behalf, our first reaction might be to correct. It's up to us to get out there and make them do it right! We need to fix them because...well because it's the right thing to do! But is it? Is that what God wants? Make no mistake, we are to be faithful witnesses of the truth of God. We are to speak the truth of his law and his gospel into all the world and that includes his teachings on what marriage is. But is that the same thing as fixing the world? No. We preach the law to convict people of sin so that they may be ready to hear the gospel truth. They need to know that they need a savior before we tell them the truth of the Savior. With the truth of the Savior we accomplish that which truly matters; we give God the opportunity to change a heart that this soul might be saved for eternity. And then we *teach* the law that we can live how God wants in gospel-motivated thankful living. This is the process by which we save the world. And this process has to start in each of us first.

Did you notice here that Paul lays out the roles for each partner in marriage, but never even suggests that either person should enforce the role of the other? The husband does not command his wife to submit. The wife does not demand sacrificial leadership from her husband. The lessons here are not for you to watch for and enforce on others. The law of God is never for you to hear and say "Well I sure hope so-n-so's listening." It's there for you to take to heart. And these lessons here are for you to take the lesson meant for you and take it to your heart. This is where it all begins. Everything wrong with the world that you want to deal with, you start right there, in *your* heart.

That's the real lesson here. Not what marriage means, not your God-given role in life; though those are both important. Not all of us are married. Not all of us have the same earthly responsibilities. What is here that truly matters is the divine union that has taken place in each one of us. Marriage is an earthly picture of this union, but it is incomplete and never perfect as we practice it. If we want to understand our roles in the world better and if we want to understand marriage properly, we need to look to this perfect divine union. The one between Christ and his Church. Between Christ and you. Because when Paul uses the word "church" here; when Jesus talks about his "church" he doesn't mean this building. He doesn't mean this congregation or any particular organization. He means it in the perfect sense, he means everyone who has been called out to believe in him. Everyone with faith in him as the Savior is his church. So that means you.

And now look at how Christ carried out this role. As head, as leader, what did he do with this position? He gave himself up for her. Why? Again it starts with the heart. Remember last week when Jesus told us to cut off everything that caused us to sin and we realized that the seat of sin is our own hearts? If we start in the heart then that's where we have to look first by nature and that's where we see ourselves at our worst. There's so much foul corruption going on there that only we know about that never makes it to the surface. But it's there, and it's disgusting. So many evil thoughts, horrible desires, greed and selfishness and anger. It's terrible to look at. And we know that if anyone knew the real me, what's really going on there on the inside, no one would ever speak to us again, much less find it possible to love us.

But Christ loves you. And this is where we find the first principle of marriage. His love is not based on us. To put it a little more technically; his love is not dependent on the object of his affection. His love does not change based on our

actions or thoughts or appearance. His love exists because he chooses for it to exist. We have a hard time with that. Our selfish natures only ever give in order to get. We love because something causes it in us. Not Christ. He loved first. Before our deserving.

And the second principle comes from what Christ did with that love. He was not willing to leave us in our foul and blackened state. He wanted us to become pure and perfect because that was what was best for us. He would gain nothing from this arrangement. He is God, he has no needs. He did this entirely for our own benefit. And what was it he did? He gave up everything. Everything that was due him by right of his godhood, everything he had every right to demand for himself; he set it aside so that you could benefit from it. He put aside the crown and the throne, he put aside the power and the glory. He lived one of the humblest of human lives and then he let himself be executed in one of the more horrible manners we have managed to invent.

All of this he did in your place. God demands a holy life from each of us. We have not done this. We have fail at this the moment we are conceived. God demands that we are free of sin. We are stained to the core with it. But Christ our head gave himself for us. He lived a holy life on your behalf. He took away your sin and put it on himself so that he could bear the punishment in your place. Everything he did, God counted as yours. You are now to him radiant, holy and blameless. Not because you are, but because he gave everything to make you this way. All for your benefit.

This is the prime example of Christian love and Christian leadership. Christ was willing to and indeed did give everything that you might be better off than you were before. Christ himself gains nothing from this that he did not already have. You gave him absolutely no reason to. In fact, you gave him any number of reasons not to. But he did anyway because he chose to love you.

And now that he has done this, now that he has made your heart clean and has made his home in you, your role as his "bride" is simply to trust him. Let him be your leader. When he makes you promises, trust them. When he asks things of you, do them without reservation or complaint. This should not be difficult now. After all, he has demonstrated his love in the most powerful way possible, he has shown that he only ever has your best interest at heart. And he has continued to do this for you throughout your life. It seems almost silly that he has to ask us to follow his lead and trust him; would we do that naturally after all he's done for us? In fact, it is perfectly natural for the heart of faith, that is exactly how it expresses itself.

And thus we arrive at the solution to fixing the world. You see it starts in the heart and when the heart is healed by Christ, the heart naturally wants to learn what it is he wants and wants to do what he wants. It is not done out of enforcement, out of fear of punishment, it happens from the core because it is the most natural thing for the heart of faith to do. This is the start. That heart will then pour out into the rest of the world; because the primary activity our head wants us to do is share him with others that they can know what you know. When God changes that person's heart, they too will pour out good into the world instead of evil but *more* importantly, it is another soul that is saved for eternity. If we think we need to save marriage or indeed any of God's teachings, this is how we do it. Not through force or law, but by teaching sin and grace that hearts may be changed.

And those changed hearts, like our own, will not just know the truth of what God desires in our lives, they will be equipped by the power of God to *live* those lives. The divine union of husband and wife can be kept properly when both have Christ in the heart. The husband, filled with what Christ has done for him, filled with everything God has given him, will have no trouble pouring out everything of himself for the sake his wife, the one God has given him to care for. All selfish demands, all abuse of authority will be set aside for an attitude that looks like Christ's. One that asks, "What can I do?" instead of "What do I get for this?" An attitude that loves because it chooses to, not dependent on what it has received in return that day. That same sort of principle carries over for any man asked to serve a position of leadership.

And wives, filled with all that Christ has done for them, will be willing to trust their husbands and follow his lead for Christ's sake. Not because he's perfect and never makes a bad call. Not because he hasn't ever been selfish in his use of authority. But because it is what Christ asks of you in your role as wife. To love and support as the Church does for Christ. This is not asked of her because she is less than her husband, it is simply the role assigned to her by God because having two leaders is chaos. Submitting does not mean being submissive, never speaking your mind or giving your opinion. It just means trusting and following your leader. And when everything he does is done to your best interest, that is hardly much to ask. And again, that attitude carries over into the other parts of life as Christian women.

You see that when both roles are carried out perfectly, marriage truly is a divine union. This is how God intends it, this is how he created it. This is how he shadows the relationship we each have with our Savior, Christ. That is where it starts. That is the divine union that truly matters that we need to spread into this world. Let Christ lead you as your head, share his truth with the world, trust him in all he asks, and eternal and earthly good for you and your hearers will be the divine result. Amen.