



MARRIAGE: LOVE'S HOLY STAGE

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Nothing grieves us more as pastors and elders than the high level of pain being felt in many marriages at PBC. Some of these problems can be put down to family backgrounds. One partner, oftentimes unbeknownst to the other, brings into the marriage a lot of pain resulting from past physical or emotional abuse. Other couples did not have biblical premarital counseling so they are ignorant as to how to cultivate their relationship and communicate effectively. Some marriages are surviving merely through the mechanism of escape. Lacking intimacy, husbands and wives escape to the private realm of their minds to an idol that offers pleasure on demand. There they indulge in secret, while they act out a facade of commitment in public. Even couples who are committed to their wedding vows often become discouraged, because they find little evidence of or support for fidelity in our culture. Divorce statistics bear stark evidence of the toll on marriage in our day. In this country in 1910, one out of 10 marriages ended in divorce. By 1980, the figure had grown to one out of two. Today in Silicon Valley, for every marriage registered there are two divorces. It would be an understatement to say that marriage is not faring well today.

Lest we get too discouraged, however, we should remember that marriage did not fare well in the apostle Paul's day either. William Barclay had this to say about marriage in the Greek society of Paul's day:

The whole Greek way of life made companionship between man and wife next to impossible. The Greek expected his wife to run his home, to care for his legitimate children, but he found his pleasure and companionship elsewhere. In the fourth century B.C., Demosthenes said,

"We have harlots for our pleasure,
concubines for daily physical use,
wives to bring up legitimate children
and to be faithful stewards in household matters."

...In Greece, home and family life were near to being extinct, and fidelity was completely non-existent...The degeneracy of Rome was tragic...It is not too much to say that the whole atmosphere of the ancient world was adulterous...The marriage bond was on the way to complete breakdown.

In the Ephesus of Paul's time, only two professions, that of prostitute or priestess, lay open to women who sought to rise to equal status or surpass men in influence. The cult of Artemis, where the goddess was worshipped as the supreme mother of nature and fertility, provided ample opportunity for these pursuits. Needing no assistance from the male species, Artemis was the ultimate symbol of female liberation in first century Asia Minor. Her priestesses were highly respected in society, but although they felt emancipated, they were stigmatized by the fact that selling sex was their profession. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul had to face the challenge of how to motivate husbands and wives who came out of such hurtful backgrounds to love and fidelity in their marriages. He does so by raising the stakes. The answer, as we will see, lay in play production.

When I was in junior high school, Mrs. Blustin, our drama teacher, told candidates for her productions that we would have the privilege of playing a part in a famous play. But first we had to try out for parts, so each of us was given a script to memorize. I was fortunate to be chosen, and on opening night I played my part with clarity, conviction and charisma. I still remember the spine-chilling applause at the final curtain call. Why is it that when a junior higher is presented with a script, he will respond by working hard to play his part? It is because he has become part of something far bigger than himself.

Privilege motivates! Marriage, says Paul, is a privilege, a holy stage. When the lights go up, two people, each playing different parts, begin acting out a drama that is much bigger than themselves, for in marriage, God is reenacting the most famous script of all: the drama of redemption, God's holy love redeeming his church. This is why Paul says, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church."

In our last study we saw that the apostle shared with the Ephesian Christians certain principles which he set down in four verb participles—speaking, singing, thanking, and submitting—actions that would help them express their spirituality in the decadent environment in which they lived. We will begin today by looking again at the fourth participle—submitting—what we could well call character screening for the drama of marriage that Paul will unfold.

I. Character Screening (2:21)

...being subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Here we have the first thing necessary. The curtain cannot rise, the play cannot even begin until the characters have adopted the right frame of mind. Mutual submission to one another in the fear of Christ, is a must. Here is how Mike Mason put it in his book, *The Mystery of Marriage, As Iron Sharpens Iron*: "Who wins the battle of wills and whims is not the point; the point is that each tries to surrender as much as possible for the sake of the other so that the love between may be honored and built up in every way."

How many couples have stepped off this very platform, having taken their spouses "for better or for worse," naively imagining that submission one to another would be easy! Their marriage, unlike others, would be a refuge from the storms of life. Their home would be their castle, complete with walls and moat, and no wind of conflict would be strong enough to breach their haven. It was only a matter of time, however, before they discovered that marriage was the very eye of a hurricane.

Again, quoting Mike Mason:

[Marriage] is not a little bastion of tenderness designed to soften the blows of fate. It is not a clever system of protection in which another person is interposed between ourselves and the pain of living. On the contrary, the person interposed may actually become the source or focus of

more suffering than we ever bargained for, the very vessel from which our own humiliation is poured. Is it not a bitter and ironic truth that the very person we love most in the world may appear to us, from time to time, to be the only thing standing between ourselves and our happiness? The fact of the matter is that holy matrimony, like other holy orders, was never intended as a comfort station for lazy people. On the contrary, it is a systematic program of deliberate and thoroughgoing self-sacrifice...For marriage is intended to be an environment in which they will be lovingly yet persistently confronted with the plainest and ugliest evidence of their sinfulness and thus encouraged on a daily basis to repent and to change...

Marriage is not a comfort station, it is a crucible! Our text holds that mutual submission is the key to married bliss, the key to bringing heaven to earth. Without it, the play will not begin. Submission, therefore, is the screen test for this drama of redemption.

We come now to the different roles.

II. The Wife's Role: The Believer (5:22-24)

Being subject to one another in the fear of Christ, wives to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

Here in his instructions to wives, Paul gives the basis, the motive, and the extent of submission.

(a) The Basis of Submission: Creation

"For the husband is the *head* of the wife," says the apostle. We must point out immediately that submission here in no sense implies inferiority. Submission is merely a reflection of the created order. Man was created first, and out of him came woman, and he named her (Gen. 2). But man's first words eloquently expressed his appreciation that at last he had met one who was his equal, and he celebrated this fact. Spiritually, the woman stood toe to toe with him as an equal heir of the grace of life. Headship has nothing to do with equality! The woman's title of Helper is evidence of the fact that she brought special something that the man was desperately lacking in himself.

Next, we have the motive of submission.

(b) The Motive of Submission: Redemption

...Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being Savior of the body

Submission is grounded in creation, but it is explained in terms of redemption. Notice that Paul says, "being Savior of the body." In the Bible, commitment is always preceded by an act of salvation. God liberated the Jews following 400 years of slavery in Egypt, but only after he had freed them did he ask them to commit themselves entirely to him. Likewise, Jesus died to redeem his church, and our response now as his people should be to commit our entire hearts to him in appreciation for his sacrificial act.

Appreciation is key! Here is how Charles Wesley expressed his appreciation to Jesus in these memorable words from his hymn, "And Can It Be?":

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray:
I woke—the dungeon flamed with light!*

*My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!*

Submission is not unthinking obedience on the part of the wife, but grateful acceptance of her husband's care. He vows to give up his life for her! Submission, therefore, is never to be coerced from the wife. It is to be freely given by her out of appreciation for her new-found freedom. David Roper put it this way, "No woman will have a problem submitting to a man who will be crucified for her."

And how far must submission go?

(c) The Extent of Submission

But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives to their husbands in everything.

Wives must respect their husbands in everything in their role as head. In the OT, not even religious vows could be used as an excuse to violate this principle of headship.

A woman might object here that her role as we have described it is dangerous and limiting. But wives are really entrusting themselves not so much to their husbands, but to the living God who rules over their husbands. An excellent illustration of this is found in the occasion when Abraham went down to Egypt and in the process put the holy seed in jeopardy. But God intervened on Sarah's behalf and used a pagan king to rebuke Abraham for his lack of faith. Wives can trust the living God who rules over their husbands.

A second objection could be as follows: Does submission imply that wives cannot speak their minds, offer a different point of view, challenge faulty thinking or confront and even resist evil in their husbands? It is wrong to think that a woman must keep her opinions to herself, as some hold the apostle Peter is saying in his word in 1 Peter 3, "If a husband is disobedient to the word, let a wife win him *without a word*." The context of this verse is referring to unbelieving husbands and how they are won over to Christ. Non-believing husbands are won, says the apostle, not by speech, not by putting tracts under their noses, but by loving deeds. This doesn't imply wives aren't free to confront their husbands with speech. This is illustrated by Sarah, who said to her husband, Abraham, who had wronged her, "You wronged me, but the LORD judge."

Make no mistake about it, sparks will fly on occasion in marriage. If this does not happen, it may well be because the partners have stopped communicating. Perhaps I can illustrate here. Emily and I sometimes disagree over finances. I come from a wealthy background and I have no trouble giving money away. Emily, on the other hand, is frugal. She is from a middle class background, but her parents divorced and she was raised on very little. This has given rise to conflict between us in the past, so we agreed to communicate better with each other regarding our giving. But, I must confess, I fall back into my old patterns of spontaneous giving now and then. Just a few days ago, she came to me with the checkbook, saying, "What was this check for?" She read me the riot act, because I had broken our agreement. We all need this kind of airing out of issues in our marriages.

So the wife's role in the drama of marriage, her holy orders, are to show how fulfilling it is to be a believer, by submitting to her husband in everything.

Now we come to the husband's role.

III. The Role of the Husband: Christ (5:25-32)

Husbands, *love your wives, just as Christ also 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 to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself, for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this cause a man shall leave His father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.

Notice the seriousness of the husband's role. If the wife's part is to play the role of the believer, the husband's is to play the part of Jesus! The importance of the husband's role may be seen in Paul's intensification of the comparative: "Wives submit as unto the Lord," but, "Husbands love your wives just as (or exactly as)." The comparative is used twice, in verses 25 and 29, to bracket the text. Notice, too, that headship is not defined in terms of husbands making decisions, not by words like "control" or "lead," but by how they love.

In these verses, Paul gives four characteristics of Christ-like love.

(a) Love Is Sacrificial

He gave Himself on her behalf.

If wives give *in*, husbands must give *up*. Notice that love is defined by a verb. That is because love is an act of the will which seeks the best for the other person regardless of cost or feeling. Headship is defined not in terms of a husband's authority to control or dominate his wife, but by his responsibility to care for, nourish, and cultivate her life. Feelings should be present, of course—they are the spark in a marriage—but they are the byproduct, not the driving force behind commitment.

This doctrine of headship is very well illustrated in the first parable in the Bible, found in the book of Judges (9:7-15). The men of Shechem had appointed Abimelek, an ancient-day Rambo whose leadership style was, "do it my way or I'll impale you upside down on a stalagmite!" as king over them. When Jotham, who was a judge of Israel, heard of Abimelek's appointment as king, he stood on Mt. Gerazim and related to the Shechemites a parable about the nature of true leadership. The trees went forth to anoint a king over them, he said, and they came to the olive tree, but the tree said, "Shall I leave my fatness with which God and men are honored to wave over you?" The fig also refused, saying, "Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit to wave over the trees?" Likewise the vine: "Shall I leave my new wine which cheers God and men to wave over you?" Then the trees came to the bramble and asked, "Come, wave over us." The bramble responded by demanding that they take refuge in his shade. If they refused, he said, "fire will come out and consume cedars of Lebanon."

The bramble is a large tree whose height and shade surpass all others. (Scholars identify the tree, *Ziziphus spinachristi*, branches of which were used to make Jesus' crown of thorns.) Nogah Hareuveni, in his book, *Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage* (Neot Kedumim, Israel, 1984), describes the bramble:

When the *atad* [the bramble] is left to grow unimpeded, it develops a wide and "wild" look, its foliage made up of clumps that seem to hang in the air. The *atad* is larger than all the other fruit trees native to Israel and casts a wide and heavy shade beneath its boughs... The thorny branches, make convenient hangers for hammocks, packs and overclothes... This tree is known to be harmful to fruit trees. It

is a strong tree, whose roots spread in a wide circle and compete with the roots of other trees with a vigor the fruit trees cannot rival. A farmer who wants his orchard to succeed must first uproot every *atad* in the vicinity, small saplings as well as full-grown trees...After [the branches] dry out, they are chopped up for excellent kindling. Both the thin and the thicker branches quickly catch fire and burn brightly, generating much heat with very little smoke (pp. 63-64).

The lesson of the parable is obvious: The bramble demanded that everyone live in his shade. If Israel came under the rule of Abimelek, he would strangle them until they were no longer able to give forth fruit to others. And if they refused, if he could not have things his own way, then, as the bramble threatened, fire would come out of him to consume the cedars of Lebanon. It is ironic that it was a woman who killed Abimelek; she threw an upper millstone on his head, crushing his skull (Judges 9:53). Tragically, a similar thing is happening in our nation today, as children are murdering their tyrannical fathers.

Contrast the bramble with the olive tree, which gives oil of fatness to honor others, or the fig tree, which gives fruit that makes life sweet for others, or the vine, which gives good wine and bring gladness to others. Husbands should give, give, and give even more. They should give honor, sweetness, and gladness. This is true headship, one that loves with a sacrificial love.

So the first characteristic of love is that it is sacrificial. The second is that it is purposeful.

(b) Love Is Purposeful

Christ gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her...that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.

The old view of the wife's role was that she was man's helper; she should take care of the domestic duties so that the husband need not be bothered with the menial tasks of life but go on to fulfill his greater role in the world. But we note that in the book of Acts, Christ did not relegate the church to menial tasks while he stood in the spotlight. No, he retreated backstage and put the spotlight on the church, helping believers to develop their spiritual gifts. In fact, everything Christ did in the gospels, and even greater works, did the apostles do in Acts.

What should godly husbands learn from this? It is that they should move backstage in an attitude of serving and allow the spotlight to shine on their wives so that they can develop their spiritual gifts and ministries. Love does not smother; it encourages and allows others to develop their freedom. And Christ did this for the ultimate glory of the church.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put this beautifully in these words:

Dare I put it like this? The beauty-Specialist will have put his final touch to the church; the massaging will have been so perfect that there will not be a single wrinkle left. She will look young, and in the bloom of youth, with colour in her cheeks, with her skin perfect, without any spots or wrinkles. And she will remain like that for ever and ever.

So love is sacrificial and purposeful.

Third, love is expressive.

(c) Love Is Expressive

...that He might sanctify her, having washed her with the

washing of water with the word...So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as also Christ does the church, because we are members of His body. (5:26a, 28-30)

Here we discover that love expresses itself in speech and in touch. When I was courting Emily, I wrote her one or two letters a day for four years. But after years of marriage, the excitement wears off and couples tend to take one another for granted. Husbands have to work at communicating through speech, because to a wife, conversation is the greatest expression of her husband's love. It will be hard for your marriage to survive unless you carve out time each week to talk to one another. Do simple things together. Walk together. Do the dishes together. Read together. Emily and I eat breakfast once a week in a restaurant far from here where no one knows us, and there we engage in small talk together. Choose things that stimulate you as a couple. Go to a movie or a play together. When husbands speak to their wives in this way, they illustrate how Christ speaks to his church, his bride, in his Word.

Love expresses itself not only in speech but in touch. A husband "nourishes and cherishes" his own flesh, says Paul. "Cherish" means "soften by heat." A husband keeps his wife warm and tender by creating a protective atmosphere of warmth and love. Women love asexual touch. They want to be held and hugged. It is a delightful thing to see older couples holding hands in church. This displays how Christ nourishes his church. He wants to hold us, to hug us and talk to us.

So love is sacrificial, purposeful, and expressive.

Finally, love prioritizes.

(d) Love Prioritizes

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. (5:31)

In marriage, a man must abandon his most precious relationship—that which he has with his parents—and cleave to his wife. Love must prioritize and focus, and thus it will involve pain. Love is single-minded. A husband's love risks all past relationships for the sake of his bride. But commitment does have its rewards. The result is one flesh, where every part of life is gathered into one union.

This abandonment of all other relationships is the holiest moment in God's dramatization of redemption, for it portrays

the determination, the single-mindedness of Christ's love for us. In order to save us and marry us he had to leave his heavenly Father. On the cross he was abandoned by God as he sought and secured his bride. When a man abandons all of his relationships and cleaves only to his wife, therefore, he is acting out the holiest moment in the drama of redemption. Just as the church was worth the pain to Christ, so to a man, leaving his past relationships to cleave to his wife is worth the pain to him.

So the role of headship for the husband is not one of stifling control or tyrannical rule, but one of the responsible initiative and sacrificial care. It is a holy role, nurtured by holy love.

And who is watching this drama?

IV. A Holy Audience (5:32-33)

This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each and every individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband.

On the opening night of my junior high play, I couldn't resist peeking at the audience through the curtain before the play began. The sight of the whole assembled school turned my opening night butterflies into squadrons of eagles! Then I noticed my mother and father entering, with all my relatives, Aunt Hazel, Uncle Glenn and Grandma, in tow. The audience gave my performance weight and importance.

So it is in a marriage. Look out from behind the curtain and observe who makes up the holy audience. Your children are there. Perhaps your parents are there. They might never have read the book, but they will come to the play because you're in it! And your neighbors and your friends from work will be there. This is the first time they've ever seen this play—and you're in it. There are visitors from every nation present, some of whom have never heard of the play before.

Then, to your amazement, you discover that there are holy angels present; they, too, have come to see the drama of redemption. The house lights are dimmed, the stage lights come on, the curtain rises, and you walk onstage to play your part. The tragedy is, oftentimes we don't know what to say because we have not read the script. Worse yet, we don't even know that a holy drama is in progress. The Playwright weeps.

It is my prayer for those of you who have lost hope that the Living God will transform your marriage from a combat zone that is barely surviving under an armed truce, to a holy drama where you feel privileged to play your part.

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