

²¹and by submitting to one another in reverence for Christ.

²²Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he himself is the Savior. ²⁴Moreover, as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, in the same way as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, by cleansing her with the washing of water in connection with the Word. ²⁷He did this so that he could present her to himself as a glorious church, having no stain or wrinkle or any such thing, but so that she would be holy and blameless. ²⁸In the same way, husbands have an obligation to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹To be sure, no one has ever hated his own body, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones. ³¹“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will be one flesh.” ³²This is a great mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³In any case, each one of you also is to love his wife as himself, and each wife is to respect her husband.

¹Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²“Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with a promise: ³“that it may go well with you and that you may live a long life on the earth.” ⁴Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

This morning, I want to tell you the story of the perfect marriage. They were young when they got married, And didn't have a whole lot. To provide, he worked like a dog. During busy holiday seasons, he'd take on as many extra jobs as he could, just to make whatever holiday they were celebrating a little bit more special. She loved him. She'd welcome him home each and every day with the biggest smile on her face. Oh, to be young and in love!

But things changed eventually. She slowly became less appreciative of him. That spark that had once burned so bright had grown dim. Sadly, she started searching out love elsewhere. I'll spare you the details, but let's just say there were other men. When he found out, it tore him up inside. All that work, all that sacrifice, all that devotion for what?

That could have been the end of their marriage. She had broken the promises she had once said so confidently. But he forgave her. It took a lot of time. It took way more work than any of those extra seasonal jobs. But he loved her, and he was willing to sacrifice his pride and walk through life with those memories of infidelity always on his mind. He loved her and wanted her to know just how loved and beautiful she was each and every day.

At first, she didn't know what to think. She had wronged him in the worst way. How could he just forgive her and move past it? How could she be deserving of this kind of love? And eventually she came to the conclusion: she wasn't. And you know what that did to her? It made her appreciate her husband more than she ever had before. She'd still wait for him to come home from work with a smile on her face, though not a smile of how happy he made her life. Instead, it was a smile of thankfulness for how loving and forgiving and patient he was with her.

The apostle Paul spends a lot of time in our sermon text talking about this perfect marriage. We're familiar with this text. We hear it at weddings. We go through it when we talk about the Sixth Commandment in Catechism or when we talk about the roles of husbands and wives in pre-marriage counseling. But this section is not a list of rules. It is a picture of Jesus' love for his Church.

Think about how it all happened. God created the world in perfection. He created Adam and Eve and then joined them together in the second marriage. And maybe you're asking, "Pastor, I've read through Genesis. I know that there was no marriage before Adam and Eve. What are you talking about 'second marriage'?" You're right. There was no marriage in the sense of a lifelong union between man and woman before Adam took Eve to be his wife. But that relationship between God and his people existed when it was only Adam. His great love for Adam leads him to recognize that Adam needs a helper, a companion to do life with him. So, God creates Eve out of Adam's rib. Now they have a relationship with each other, but even more than that, a relationship with God. He had created them to be a reflection of himself, God's representatives in his beautiful and perfect creation. Their whole existence revolved around serving and loving God. And they would hang out with their Creator each and every day.

But you all know what happens in Genesis chapter 3. The devil comes and tempts both Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This tree was put in the garden, not to tempt Adam and Eve, but to give them an opportunity to walk past it out of love for God. But temptation is too strong. The devil warns them the God is hiding something from them, that he's keeping them from their full potential. Eventually, Eve eats the fruit from the forbidden tree. Then she gives some to Adam, who's watching all of this happen in front of him. Immediately, sin enters the world. They cover up and hide in shame.

When God comes to them, he asks Adam why he's disobeyed God. Adam blames Eve and accuses God of giving him this defective woman. What a spineless excuse! Then he turns to Eve, and she blames the serpent. Because of their sin, their lives and the lives of their children will be cursed. All women will only bear children with great pain, and their desire in marriage will be to wrestle away authority from their husbands. All men will toil in thankless and difficult work. In so many ways, life will be hard and displeasing, and it will all end in death.

But God does not end his marriage with mankind right then and there. It would be easy to send Adam and Eve away in the divorce of death. But that's not how God handles the people he loves. Instead, even before he lays out the curses of sin to Adam and Eve, he says these incredible words to the devil: "I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will crush your head, and you will crush his heel." Adam and Eve are clearly in earshot. The one who had tried to destroy God's people would himself be destroyed by God. God would send a champion to crush the head of the deceiver.

Thousands of years later, that child was born in the backwoods of Bethlehem. And you know the rest of the story. Jesus lived the perfect life that you and I couldn't live. Jesus died the death that you and me and Adam and Eve should have experienced. From that moment in the garden, God announced forgiveness in Christ, a reconciliation with his adulterous bride. That reconciliation to God wasn't easy. It took time. But when Jesus cried out his last on the cross, the promise that Adam and Eve had overheard, the promise that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob heard repeated again and again, the promise that you and I see with the completed picture, that promise was fulfilled. Full and free forgiveness was poured out from the perfect bridegroom to his homely bride.

This is the most important marriage that we are part of, that marriage between Christ and his Church. He's the one who makes us holy, cleansing us in the waters of baptism. He's the one who gives us lasting life, where there are no stains or wrinkles or blemishes, no reminders that death approaches. He's the one who makes us holy and blameless in the sight of our Heavenly Father. This shapes the way we look at our Savior. It shapes the way we look at ourselves. But it also shapes the way we look at our marriages.

A Christian marriage is different than marriages in the secular world. It's not different in that there's no sin. It's different in the "why" we love one another. For so many, the focus of their marriage is on what they can get out of it. Are they being provided stability? Are they feeling cherished? Is their spouse bringing them pleasure? But what shapes the love of Christians within marriage? It's not what their spouse does for them. It's what Jesus motivates them to do for their spouse.

Let's look at this section from Ephesians. And let's start with husbands. Husbands, you are to love your wives as Christ loved the Church. And we just spent the first half of this sermon talking about what Christ's love is. Its faithfulness in the face of faithlessness. It's sacrifice when all that's returned is selfishness. We're going to talk about wives in a minute, but wives have been called to love as the Church loves Jesus. But husbands, you are to love your wives as Jesus loves you.

Now, that's an impossible job. Unless you are different than every other husband throughout history, including Adam who threw his wife under the bus, you can think of times when you have not been the selfless, sacrificing leader that God has called you to be. As men, who have been given the privilege and responsibility of authority, we've certainly struggled with the extremes of being a lazy bum who refuses to lead and an overbearing authoritarian who barks out orders like a dictator. We are not always so willing to serve our wives in love. Instead, we start believing that they exist to serve us.

But look at the bridegroom of the Church. He is not too weak to lead. He is not too self-centered to serve. For all of your sins as husbands, look to Jesus. Look to Jesus, not just as the example of how we should live with our wives, but to find forgiveness for all those times we abuse the authority God has given us.

Now, let's look at wives. Wives, you have been called by God to submit to your husbands, to love them by showing them respect and support. And notice, nobody's forcing you to do this. Jesus does not force you to submit to his authority. He washes you clean of sin and invites you to live in peace under him. In the same way you are not forced into marriage. There is a reason we don't do shotgun weddings. There is a reason we talk about how the bond of marriage he's built on mutual consent. You are not forced to submit to your husbands or respect them. But you do place yourself in that role when you choose to get married.

But what does it mean to submit? What does it mean to respect? It does not mean getting walked all over. It does not mean being treated like a child. Marriage is teamwork. It is doing life together, with both husband and wife understanding that their spouse is just as precious to God as they themselves are. Submission and respect means building them up. It's to support them and help them as they lead the family through the ups and downs of life. And as wives build up and empower their husbands, the result is often going to be husbands who are more receptive to the thoughts and desires of their wives and seek to protect and cherish this wonderful gift God has blessed them with.

Just like husbands, this is an impossible job to do. As all of you ladies know from your marriages, there are times when you don't respect your husband's authority. Maybe you don't think he's acting in a way that is deserving of respect. Maybe you think you could lead better. But whether these things are true or not, God has given you a special role in your marriage. You are to love your husband as the Church loves Jesus. And just as sinful husbands turn to the Lord for repentance when they don't live out their callings faithfully, sinful wives should do the same. They should do the same, because they know just how rebellious we've been against our God. And they know just how loving and forgiving God has been to us in sending his Son to make us holy.

Your marriage will not be perfect. It won't be perfect because you're a sinner married to a sinner. You will fail in your role and your spouse will fail in their role. But you know that you are part of an even greater marriage, that marriage of Christ and the Church. And knowing what God has done for you motivates you to

love and serve him. There are a million ways to love and serve God, and many of those ways are by us serving others. Just one of the ways we serve others is in serving our spouse. This relationship is the greatest blessing and the greatest challenge, so it's no surprise that God uses this picture to show us that he is always faithful. Live out your varied callings, whether married or unmarried, motivated by the love of Jesus. Amen.