

St. John Chrysostom on Marriage

St. John Chrysostom, was called the “golden-mouthed” because of his extraordinary preaching. He gave an insightful sermon on St. Paul’s inspired teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5:21-33 that is summarized here because it is too long to be cited in full.¹

General principles

There is no relationship between humans as close as that of a husband and wife, if they are united in love as they ought to be. This bond is so strong that it is the force that binds society together. Man will take up arms and even sacrifice their lives of the sake of this love.

St. Paul opens his instruction with a principle of equality, “be subject to one another” (Eph 5:21). Then addressing wives he says, “Be subject to your husband as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22). Notice, the guiding principle - “as to the Lord.” In other words, when a wife yields to her husband, she should consider that she is obeying him as part of her service to the Lord. So Paul adds, “As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject to their husbands” (Eph 5:24). The husband holds the place of the head, whereas the wife holds the place of the body – or better, the heart. “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, and is himself its Savior” (Eph 5:23). This attitude brings harmony in the family and avoids endless struggles for control.

Over the years I have observed that a determined wife will usually win the battle of wills, but she loses the war as her husband withdraws from the arguing into television, sports, hobbies, books or, worse, an adulterous relationship.

The saint observed: “Were there is equal authority, there never is peace. A household cannot be a democracy, ruled by everyone, but the authority must necessarily rest in one person. The same is true for the Church: when men are led by the Spirit of Christ, then there is peace. There were five thousand men in the Jerusalem church, and they were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they were subject to one another; this surely is an illustration of wisdom and godly fear. Notice, however, that Paul explains love in detail, comparing it to Christ’s love for the church and our love for our own flesh.”

Obedience is hard, but love is harder. Paul commands husbands, “love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). If necessary a husband should surrender his life for his wife. But even then, a husband will never do anything equal to what Christ has already done for us. A husband is called to sacrifice himself for the person to whom he willingly joined, but Jesus give himself up for us who turned our backs on him in the hatred

¹ *St. John Chrysostom On Marriage and Family Life*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, pp. 43-64. John became the reforming bishop of Constantinople in 397. He was loved by the people, but he had powerful enemies that forced his exile in 404 to the Armenian frontier in a place the saint called “the loneliest spot on earth.” Not satisfied, his ruthless enemies made John endure a death march with little rest across rugged backcountry over rough mountain trails. He died from the ordeal on September 14, 407 glorifying God with his last words.

of sin. One's partner for life, the mother of one's children, the source of one's every joy, should never endure fear and threats, but love and kindness. What kind of marriage can there be when the wife is afraid of her husband or in dread that he does not love her? The husband who does not make his wife the loved one in the family has failed as a husband and as a man.

One of the discoveries in marriage is the realization that our spouse is not the perfect person we thought before the marriage or if we knew they were not perfect, we subsequently discovered more limitations. Well, of course, because we are expected to grow and become less flawed through the sacrifices of love that a successful marriage entails. Pride, stubbornness and selfishness are tendencies that impede, yes, even cripple genuine love. Learning to love is the challenging task of a lifetime.

So when the original ardor no longer strikes us with its original intensity, we need to recall that authentic love is an act of the will not a bubbling over of feelings and hormones. Thus, Jesus "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and fears, to him who was able to save him from death" (Heb 5:7). Jesus sets the standard of marital fidelity in difficult circumstances. Thus, St. Paul reminded us: "Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:7-8).

The Church Fathers loved to contrast Adam and the new Adam, Jesus Christ. Thus, Chrysostom wrote, "From Adam's side came the bearer of corruption, but from Christ's side came life. Death blossomed in paradise but was laid on the cross. The Son of God shares our nature so we can share His; as He has us in Him, so we have Him in us."

Saint John Chrysostom reminds husbands to love like Jesus. "Seek beauty of soul, and imitate the Bridegroom of the church. . . The love that began on honest grounds still continues ardently, since its object is beauty of the soul, not of the body. . . Look for affection, gentleness, and humility in a wife; these are the tokens of beauty. But let us not seek lovely physical features, nor reproach her for lacking things over which she has no control." I know a man who loves his wife more when he sees her stretch marks and the scars of her Caesarian, because they represent badges of honor exemplifying her willingness to expend herself for their children. They represent her self-sacrificing love.

The charge, "husbands, love your wives," is a serious obligation, not a favor nor a suggestion. Men must recognize that we inherited a woundedness in our ability to love that came from Adam, who was afraid to put his life on the line for Eve when the adulterous serpent seduced her in Eden. God told this to Eve after the Fall: "Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16). Countless women since have longed for their husband's heart, but endured a tyrant instead. For a Christian husband this is beyond disgraceful!

There is a marvelous parallel that occurs in marriage that is analogous with our oneness in Christ. In marriage two become one flesh. "Our relationship to Christ is the same; we become one flesh with Him through communion." Developing this comparison, the saint added that

Genesis reveals “that for two to become one flesh is a great and wonderful mystery. Now Paul speaks of Christ as the greater mystery; for He left the Father and come down to us, and married His Bride, the Church, and became one spirit with her: ‘he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him’ (1 Cor 6:17)”.

In contrast, Chrysostom observed, “How difficult it is to have harmony when husband and wife are not bound together by the power of love!” Then the saint added: “And what if my wife refuses to obey me?” a husband will ask. Never mind! Your obligation is to love her; do your duty!” Remember, Paul began with the admonition, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21).

Chrysostom sums Paul instruction with these words: “A wife should respect her husband even when he shows her no love, and a husband should love his wife even when she shows him no respect... However, she should reverence him as the head and he should love her as his body... This, then, is what it means to marry in Christ: spiritual [sacramental] marriage is like spiritual birth, which is not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh (Jn 1:13)... Seek the things which please God, and those which please man will follow soon enough... Therefore, it is possible for us to surpass all others in virtue by becoming good husbands and wives.”

How to talk to ones wife

“Always begin by telling her how much you love her... Tell her that you love her more than your own life, because this present life is nothing, and that your only hope is that the two of you pass through this life in such a way that in the world to come you will be united in perfect love. Say to her, ‘Our time here is brief and fleeting, but if we are pleasing to God, we can exchange this life for the Kingdom to come. Then we will be perfectly one both with Christ and each other, and our pleasure will know no bounds. I value your love above all things, and nothing would be so bitter or painful to me as our being at odds with each other. Even if I lose everything, any affliction is tolerable if you will be true to me.’” He added, “Prefer her before all others.”

Spiritual life together

Pray together at home and go to church; when you come back home, let each ask the other the meaning of the readings and the prayers... Remind one another that nothing in this life is to be feared, except offending God. If your marriage is like this, your perfection will rival the holiest of monks... Be sure that you humble yourself and that your words are full of grace and kindness... If we order our lives in this way and diligently study the Scriptures, we will find lessons to guide us in everything we need!”

The fruit

“What sort of person do you think the children of such parents will be?.. For generally the children acquire the character of their parents, are formed in the mold of their parent’s temperament, love the same things their parents love, talk in the same fashion, and work for

the same ends... In this way we will be able to please God, and to pass through the course of this life in virtue and to gain those blessings which He has promised to those who love Him.'

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