

Goal: The hearers would cherish marriage as the great mystery of God.

A 4-year-old girl was having a difficult time grasping the concept of marriage. So her father opened his wedding album, thinking visual images would help. He pointed out the bride arriving at the church, the wedding ceremony, the recessional, and the reception. *“Now do you understand what marriage is?” “I think so,”* she said. *“That’s when Mommy came to work for us, right?”*

It’s not just 4-year-olds who struggle to understand what marriage is. Many treat marriage as a kind of business partnership with a little bit of romance thrown into the mix. As long as both partners are happy and profitable, the partnership continues. If not, it dissolves. But since marriage isn’t a man-made invention, we need to turn to God’s Word to find out what marriage is really all about. This morning God tells us that His design for marriage is actually a profound mystery. Marriage isn’t just a way for God to fill the earth with people or to provide caring families. Marriage is meant to illustrate the deep bond between Christ and His Church, and it begins like this, ***“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the Church, His body, and is Himself its Savior. Now as the Church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”*** (Ephesians 5: 22 – 24)

“Wives, submit to your husbands.” Now, those are fightin’ words, and it seems like every time they’re read, I always hear a few sighs or snorts. Like, *“Come on, haven’t we moved beyond this Neanderthal idea of the wife’s submission?”* But that contempt is misplaced, because it comes from looking for reasons to reject the Word, rather than listening to it. ***“Wives, submit to your husbands...as the Church submits to Christ.”*** So, how does the Church submit to Christ? One example is when we pray the Lord’s Prayer: *“Thy will be done.”* Not *“Our will”* or *“My will”*, but *“Thy will be done.”* In other words, we don’t say, *“Lord, we’ve gathered here to tell You what to do.”* But we pray, *“Lord, we’re not here to get our way; but we trust that You work all things for our good. Let Your will be done and we will work to serve You.”* So when God Word, ***“Wives, submit to your husbands...as the Church submits to Christ”*** that means that a wife needs to approach marriage saying, *“Husband, I’m not here to order you around to get what I want. I’m here to serve you, to love and to cherish you, trusting that you’re here to care for me.”* That doesn’t sound demeaning does it?

God’s Word continues, ***“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her.”*** (Ephesians 5: 25) Husbands are commanded to love their wives, but not in some warm and fuzzy or lustful type of way. Husbands are to love their wives as ***“Christ loved the Church.”*** Again, how did Christ love the Church? He died for her, so that He would cleanse His people of their sin. Think about that. Jesus is the Son of God, the 2nd person of the Trinity, wasn’t born of Mary to come and sit on a throne and

be served, like a loser husband. He came to serve by giving His life as a ransom for many. That means husbands aren't supposed to approach marriage saying, "*How much work can I dump on my bride?*" But rather, "*Wife, I'm not here to order you around to get what I want. I'm here to serve you, to love and cherish you, trusting you're here to care for me.*"

So there you go. God's mystery of marriage. It doesn't sound that complicated does it? A man and a woman promise to work hard at serving each other and working daily together for the rest of their lives. Even that one-flesh union that God reserves for marriage doesn't sound oppressive or demeaning. It is, in fact, the only way a marriage can work and that's how God designed from the beginning.

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." (Genesis 2: 24, Ephesians 5: 31) God created Adam and Eve in Paradise, without sin, so that they would selflessly serve one another. But what happened is that they fell into sin? And goodbye serving; hello selfishness, which poisons every relationship.

Now, sin's consequence to marriage is that Eve would try to control Adam, and Adam would want to rule over Eve. Selfishness is a poison to every marriage, but it's not just in marriage, you see it everywhere. Put a plate of cupcakes in front of a group of toddlers and everyone wants the one with the most frosting. It's human nature, sinful human nature. And it's especially destructive when it comes to relationships, like marriage. Trust has got to be earned and it's so easily lost.

Whether you're married or not, aware of it or not, you're sinful and selfish before God. Or, to use the language of our text, you're stained, spotted, wrinkled, and blemished. Your sinful nature will be quick to deny it, because selfishness doesn't like to admit fault. That's why, whoever you are, it's a good daily routine to examine yourself for sin and repent. Be quick to say, "*I was wrong;*" and be quicker to say, "*I forgive you, and I won't selfishly hold this against you.*" But there's something more here that Paul is talking about than just marriage. There's a better mystery to be revealed.

Marriage is more than the union of husband and wife. It's a picture of Christ and His bride, the Church. It's an picture of the Gospel. And so for that reason God commands all people, whether they are Christians or not, to honor it for life and keep it pure. I think that's the reason why the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh try so hard to trample marriage, treating it as some outdated, meaningless custom. If you notice, it's these same enemies who try to make Christ's cross look outdated and meaningless.

But this picture reveals a divine mystery. The Son of God seeks a bride, and only the best will do. Kings sons' don't just pick up some floozy on the side of the road. They seek brides of character, whose purity is intact. Jesus is the Son of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, Who is holy, righteous, sinless, and ever-faithful and He deserves a bride who is the same. But there aren't any to be found. There is no one who seeks God, for all have sinned and are stained, spotted, blemished and defiled, including you and me. Only the bride accompanies Christ, the Bridegroom, into the marriage feast of the Lamb in Heaven. All others are left outside in the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. But that's not what the Lord wants for you. By His grace, He's made you His own. He brought you into His Church: and together, we are the Bride of Christ.

It is for you that Jesus took on flesh. It is for you that He gave Himself up to die on the cross. He bore your spots, your stains, your blemishes and guilt. And there, He endured the scorn that this world heaps on those who are defiled. There, He died in your place, in selfless sacrificial service to you. Or, using the words of Genesis, for you, His bride, Jesus left His Father in heaven and was born of Mary. Then He left His mother at the cross, commending her to John, to die for you. Jesus holds fast to you, His bride. He focuses on your wellbeing over His own, taking your sins and making them His so that He might suffer and die in your place. That's where we get to the two becoming one, for Christ joins you to Himself, by His means of grace. He has cleansed you by the washing of water with the Word in Baptism, washing every stain and blemish of sin from you, and He clothed you in His own righteousness.

However, you're still going to be tempted, daily, by the Devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh to be unfaithful to your Bridegroom. They want to destroy your marriage daily, because that selfish, sinful nature still clings to you. But by His mercy, He gives you His Spirit so that you are enabled to quickly confess your sins, saying, "*I was wrong*" and He is quick to forgive. Until death parts you from this world, Christ visits you in His Word and His Supper to keep you forgiven, unstained, undefiled.

Do you understand the mystery of marriage now? Marriage is to be characterized by love and faithfulness. Yet, while love and faithfulness may be there, some use marriage as an excuse for selfishness and even unfaithfulness. But God wants each of us to know what His picture of marriage is so that you and I would know Christ's love. And so that we might be part of His bride, the Church, He has given Himself up on the cross for us. Because of His sacrifice, you and I are holy and blameless. Because of His cross, you and I are forgiven for all of our sins. In Jesus name. Amen.