

The first relationship which the apostle mentions as being reoriented by our union with Christ Jesus is the marriage relationship. Therefore, for some of you here today, this will be preparatory, if you plan on being married, but are not presently. For some of you this will be reflective, as you have been married, but are not presently due to death or divorce. For many of you, this will be particularly pertinent to the present. But, for all of you, it is an opportunity to behold how the lordship of Jesus Christ alters the very fabric of human relationships, and how this redemption of these most intimate of connections reveals the glory of God to the world, and even to ourselves.

Therefore, the apostle sums up the redemption of all of our human relationships by stating in 3:17, **“whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”**

This summarizing command is applied initially to the marital relationship in which it is most significant for the communal growth in grace. The Church is the firstfruits of God’s redemption, a foretaste of glory divine. And the faithfulness of the Church is reflected in the faithfulness of its marriages, as they are the divine icon of the redemptive relationship between Jesus and His people. Where marriages thrive in mutually interdependent honoring of the other in the Church, God is glorified, and society benefits from its good.

Therefore, let us first look at how our union with Christ leads each of us, who are married, to glorify God by how we treat our spouses.

The initial call for wives to submit in this reflection is given “as in the Lord.” That’s an important phrase. “In the Lord.” What does it mean? Well, remember the primary theme of this letter to the Colossians? It is our union with Christ Jesus. Both husbands and wives, you are united to Christ Jesus first and foremost. Marriage will one day come to end, and there will be no marriage in heaven, because the eternal reality to which it points as an icon will be realized: The Church is bound to Christ Jesus. This is the purpose of your marriage now, to reflect and proclaim this greater truth of our union with Him by faith. What does this mean? His assets become ours and our

liabilities become His to answer for. His righteousness, obedience, and faithfulness to the Father are attributed to us in joint account. Our sinfulness, selfishness, ugly shame, become His debts to account for as our cosigner. Therefore, all of you, both men and women, have all the honor which you really need “in the Lord.” You have all the belonging which you really need in your union with Him in order to submit well and love well to the glory of God. Remember this as we hear the Word, Christ Jesus is the Lord of all. Both husbands and wives: You serve the Lord Jesus by obeying His commands.

Wives, therefore, you are to submit yourselves to your husbands. In this command to submit, you are called to reflect and display God’s character through honoring your husbands, particularly by subjecting yourselves to your husbands’ authority.

And while the glorious marriage will be mutually interdependent and other-honoring, it may be that your husband doesn’t always love you well, doesn’t honor you well, and your ability to heed this command to honor him through submission will be attainable not because he has been a perfect husband, but because Christ Jesus has been for you. Your eyes, as Paul commanded us all in the first 4 verses of chapter 3, must be upon Jesus and His finished works for you, seated and sovereign and saving and secure. In your submission to your husband, you are honoring Christ Jesus first and foremost, even when your husband isn’t loving you well. Let this be your goal.

I want to try to illustrate now what such submission is and what it is not.

First, submission seeks to build your husband up, to see him fashioned in holiness into the man that God designed him to be. It is encouraging and hopeful. It, like the Holy Spirit, comes alongside your husband to point Him to Jesus, to remind him of the sufficiency of Christ for his honor and belonging, to carry his burdens when he feels the weight of his failures and help him to place it upon the back of the Christ.

You are to do this humbly, subjecting yourself to his authority, even if you would do it differently, and you are to do so for his good and for his honor. Therefore, submission never seeks to belittle him or ignore him or punish him, through shouting or through silence, because he didn’t do things your way. Even if his way may lead to difficulty, it

doesn't seek to subvert him or manipulate him in an effort to coerce him, with aggressive words or passive tears, to go against his conscience or wisdom. Your submission to your husband is an honoring of God, a prophetic proclamation to the world of the God who submitted Himself, even to mistaken men, for their redemption and good. You have an eternally weighty role in this.

Now, it is here, also, that we must remember the limitations to submission. While submission, in its basic sense, means following an order, there are times when it is not honoring to follow an order. If your alcoholic husband's commands you to pick up some Jack Daniels on the way home, it is not dishonoring to refuse to do so. You honor him by seeking his holiness. However, if his choice is not sinful or your obedience to it would not cause you to sin, then submit to him. That is the command which honors Christ, and you do so as one united to Christ. It is Christ Jesus to whom you are ultimately submitting. If there is confusion about how to do that, you should seek the wisdom of godly people to help you both understand the Lord's will.

Submission does not mean being a silent doormat. Love may cover a multitude of sins, but it doesn't cover up all sins. We must recognize that people in authority will sometimes misapply this command of submission in order to get their own way. In extreme cases this becomes abusive control and manipulation, and such manipulative persons do this in a few ways that I want to mention here, to clarify where there may be confusion, because abusive behavior has been permitted to continue in the Church, where it ought not, when we make excuses for abusive men by falsely appealing to a distorted view of submission.

The first distortion of submission is the lie that any disagreement is a lack of submission. This is simply false. Disagreement is not dishonoring. You can discuss, and even give advice and wisdom to your husband over decisions that need to be made in the family. Discussion is not a lack of submission. You can discuss, disagree, and submit at the same time. It has to do with respect and honor. When there is significant disagreement, asking trusted leadership to weigh in is not subversive of a husband's authority.

Manipulative husbands and pastors silence honorable women by appealing to this distortion. Even then, wives, seek to honor *in a way that is consistent with holiness*. Disagreement that is aimed at holiness is not dishonoring. It is possible to disagree in a dishonorable manner, of course, but disagreement in and of itself is not necessarily dishonoring nor displeasing to God.

It is also not gossip to ask wise leadership for help in your marriage. Now, seeking to dishonor and spread infamy amongst others so that they will think poorly of your husband, or to justify your own sin, is gossip. However, when the revelation of need for help is exposed to trusted leadership in a fashion which seeks to minimize the dishonor of your husband, where the perceived sin is kept to minimum exposure through confidentiality, and is intended for the thriving of your husband and not his demise, then it can be said to be submissive seeking to honor him. It appeals to God's Word, in God's way, to God's people, for God's glory and the good of your husband.

Another distortion is the accusation that if you do not submit, than you are proud. This accusation of pride is meant to silence opposition by making a person feel ashamed for saying "no." Everyone knows that pride is bad, but it is not pride to limit the harmful behavior of another, when that limit is consistent with God's Word and is intended for holiness. Remember that Jesus also refused to sin or to cooperate in it. If your husband demands that you do something that brings harm to your children, it is not proud to refuse to submit for the sake of your children. You are loving your children, which is the higher law and greater reflection of God.

Now, each of these manipulations work because they are half-truths and misapplied. We become confused in desiring to honor the Lord and one another, and sometimes I can't tell which side is up. So, how do we submit when such complexities and confusions are present? We bring everything into the light. We stop trying to figure things out on our own. Deception flourishes in isolation. We must learn to walk in the community of the faithful, for the right reasons. We do not have to fear being known, because we belong to God in Christ. Paul told the Ephesians to expose the deeds of darkness...and Christ will shine on you. We can entrust ourselves to the Lord. So, when your husband is not asking you to sin or act against your conscience, submit your

way to the Lord and humbly obey your husband. It is the Lord, ultimately, whom you are serving, and your submission preaches to the world of the character of God. But when your conscience is confused, bring your trouble to the Church. We are the community of Christ who walk in the light. Ask others wise in the Word to help you see well.

Remember, Christ Jesus is your ultimate savior. Not your husband, not your children, not your marriage. Charles Price notes, “Jesus Christ is your life, and as such He must be your strength, your wisdom, your ultimate resource from which you are to draw continuously, and upon whom you must continually depend.” When you are depending on Christ Jesus, drawing from His promises, commands, and encouragements daily, you will be able to submit rightly, humbly, even when it is hard. Remember the goal: to reflect the glory of God and the relationship between Jesus and His Church. It is an eternal purpose, and thus a glorious one.

Now, husbands, to reach the same goal, love your wives. This is how you reflect the glory of God, the beauty of Christ Jesus and His love for the Church. You help her to thrive, as God intends, when you expend your life for her sake, even when she doesn’t honor or respect you well.

And do not be embittered towards her. That’s what the word “harsh” means here: it is something which tastes bitter and is upsetting to the stomach. You are to value your wives as sweet to your soul, desirable, the delight and joy of your hearts. That’s the command here. To love is to place your joy in the joy of another. Jesus gave His life for us, so that our joy in God, our grateful gladness for His grace, would enliven His own. He endured the cross for the joy set before him. Do you see this?

Now, love your wife like that. Lay down your reputation for her reputation. Give of all your strength so that she might rejoice in the Lord. Help her to see her union with Christ as the foundation for her joy. Your union with her is very important, but it is not her hope. Christ Jesus is her hope. Love her to that end.

Love is not fearful of her, either, but is willing to speak to her need, to gently confront her unbelief with truth. I think that the secondary command “not to be embittered” is

telling. For, when your wife sins against you, or when she is foolish, or when she is manipulative, we have a tendency to flee towards independence rather than pursue the interdependence of mutual honor. We are prone to become angry and try and control one another from a bitter disdain, or to become silently fearful and seek to escape the perceived disgust of contentiousness for the sweeter tasting fare of our hobbies, our work, or, God forbid, in the less contentious flattery of someone else. Bitterness is a root which springs up to corruption and defiles many, and bitterness is an attitude. Your wife is not a bitterness. It's the taste buds of our hearts that are the problem, not our wives, and we are commanded to relish them as delightful rather than disdain them as bitter, in order to honor God.

Love is full of hope, even when its beloved is striking out in her fears or self-centeredness. Remember the love of Jesus for you. Remember your own sins, your own foolishness, your own divisive dissension which struck out in fear and self-centeredness. And as you remember these things, seize onto the gospel truth that Christ Jesus loves you so much that He endured those very things in order to rescue you from them.

As he has honored you, so you honor your wife. Listen to her to know her, and to gain from her strengths. Encourage those strengths. If she has wisdom in certain areas, ask her to help you where you are weak. Where she has insight, ask for her advice. Let her use her gifts in the fullness of the ways which God has created her. Help her to be strong for the glory of God and the edification of others. Use what God has given to you (which is everything) to help her be all that God has designed her to be. Show her how much she matters, how desired that she is. You cannot do this if you are holding bitterness towards her, can you? You must be devoted to her joy and her holiness because it is sweet to your soul to see her thrive.

Serve your wife as Jesus has served His people. He said He didn't come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for the many. Walk like your Master. You have all the honor that you need in your union with Him. God sees and rejoices when you serve your wife. You honor Christ and reflect His love when you do so.

Be patient towards her as He is patient with you. See his grace towards you at the beginning of every day, and then love your wife out of that deep, deep love of Christ Jesus towards you. Don't try and be the Holy Spirit, but gently and patiently lead your wife to Jesus, shepherding her step by hopeful step towards the Chief Shepherd. That is your loving and virtuous duty, and how you reflect the glory of God.

Bitterness speaks down, but love builds up. Even when it must uncomfortably confront sin in her, it speaks words of the hope of change, of restoration, with the promise of intimacy when there is a return to holiness. Jesus never ridicules his church. He never demeans her. He never acts selfishly towards her. He invests his time with her, he made himself vulnerable, and he told her that he loved her more than life itself...and he proved it. That reflection of Him is the purpose of you loving your wife. It is an eternal goal and is your glory to do.

Look what a joy it is for a man to honor his wife by loving her like this, and for a wife to honor her husband by subjecting herself like this. It reflects the relationship between Jesus and the Church, and it is a joy to do when it is mutually honoring and interdependent! It is a glorious good and a pleasurable peace, a united team imaging the God who created them and redeemed them. Such a marriage can be attained, for God is with you. Such a marriage can be full of beauty, joy, adventure, and even fun, because it thrives in dependence and hope in God, whose love for us is redemptively glorious.

USHERS FORWARD

This Communion table is our remembrance of that love and of this glorious union which we reflect in marriage. We remember His life-giving act of a heart which held no bitterness, but which embraced the joy of his beloved Father and his beloved Bride more than receiving the applause of men which he deserved. This table is the remembrance of his death...which was a merciful act of love towards sinners. Listen to his cry from the cross, "Father, forgive them! Because they do not know what they are doing." That, my friends, is the merciful cry of a heart in which there is no drop of bitterness, but love acting for our joy. He died that we might live, and He lives that we might live to God.

As we remember His love for us, exemplified in the symbols of this blood-colored wine and the broken-edged bread, like his body for us, let us receive it with gratitude and let us, like the Bride he has redeemed us to be, submit ourselves to Him in all things, devoting our strengths for His honor, His glory, and His great renown.