

If we want to understand the essence of marriage, the uncompromising love which binds it and the unwavering commitment which preserves it, it helps to begin by looking at Ephesians 5:25 which tells us that Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her.

Ephesians 5:22-33 focuses on giving, but let us start with the fact that Christ Himself gave. Giving is what love does. The kings of this world often expand their kingdoms by taking, by capturing people of foreign lands and seizing their property. But Jesus, the Son of God who is King of kings and Lord of lords, who rides forth and has still to conquer (Revelation 6:2), advances not by taking but by giving, not by suppressing but by transforming, not by forcing people against their will but by pouring out His Spirit upon them and making them willing in a day of His power. The people of His kingdom are not coerced from the outside, in other words, but are recreated in Christ and made new on the inside, and, as a result, they are His willing subjects who have tasted the goodness of the Lord and know the blessing of trusting in Him. They are moved with their whole heart to say in the words of Sir Henry Williams Baker (based on Psalm 23),

“The King of love my Shepherd is,
whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His
and He is mine forever.”

Let us proceed now with what Christ gave. He provides everything the sinner needs, so that the sinner saved by grace is complete in Him who is the Head of all principality and power, (Colossians 2:10). Yet first and foremost the Lord Jesus gave Himself – that is right, He gave His own life – this is the crowning act of love, and it is the foundation of everything else He gives. This is the ultimate gift, Christ on the cross, and there can be no salvation for anyone apart from that. Just as kings of the earth often expand their kingdoms by taking from foreign powers, so they sometimes do it, too, by way of purchase (with public funds, with money set aside to provide for and protect their subjects), which is to say that they take

again, this time from their own people, in order to buy their way to greater power and prominence. But Jesus, the only Mediator between God and men, the only One under heaven by whom sinners may and must be saved (John 14:6), gave Himself. Think about it. He came into the world to be the sacrificial Lamb, the Substitute for sinners, in order to offer up His own body on the cross to pay the penalty in full for all their sins, and He did so that by His death they might have life. Sinners therefore are not “redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18,19).

Let us examine, finally, for whom Christ gave Himself. He gave Himself for “the whole world” (1 John 2:2), for people of every tribe and tongue and nation (Revelation 5:9), but not for everyone without exception. The gospel call is freely and sincerely offered to all, to be sure, but Christ Jesus died and secured the salvation, rather, only for all whom His Father would give Him (John 6:37), for all whom the Father had chosen in Christ from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) and were appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48). These are the ones, and only these, who would ever come to Him. Jesus gave Himself, as our text says, for the Church, His Bride, and how amazing it is that He should ever do that! Does this mean that Christians are inherently more deserving than others? No – a thousand times No! – each and every one of us is the chief of sinners along with everybody else (1 Timothy 1:15). As Paul wrote the Christians in Rome, “For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7,8).

Let me draw your attention now, dear reader, to the fact that this text, Ephesians 5:25, appears in the midst of a passage (vv. 22-33) with specific instruction on marriage – that is what this verse is here for, to tell us about marriage – and we are told in no uncertain terms, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her.” Our Lord’s atoning sacrifice, in other words, is set forth in these verses as the model and impetus for our own marital wellbeing. We may be very much aware of how indispensable the cross of Christ is to salvation, but are we aware of how vital it is for laying the groundwork for marriage as well? We may think that our commitment to our spouse is somehow at odds with our devotion to the Lord, but, in fact, our commitment to our spouse

(if we are married) is an essential part of our devotion to the Lord, and we are not as faithful to the Lord as we should be if we are careless about, or negligent of, our spouse. If we have problems in our marriage, therefore, let us not look to our neighbours for answers, or to what our culture dictates, but to what the Bible says of Christ and His Church, to what it says of what He has done for her, to see the kind of commitment we need to set things straight.

There is a familiar saying, perhaps you have heard it, that marriage is all about 'give and take' – and, however reasonable that may sound, it is usually people who continue to have troubles in their marriage who give that advice. The problem with this counsel is two-fold: (a) it is never clear when to 'give' and when to 'take', and on the bigger issues people almost always want to take; and (b) because of those bigger issues which rarely go well, the bickering too often leads to deep-rooted resentment, frustration, and even divorce. Is there a better way?

Yes, there is a much better way, and we do not have to look beyond this passage in Ephesians 5 to find it. Marriage is not about 'give and take', but is all about giving – period. Just think 'giving'. Let a husband give himself fully and completely to the wellbeing and happiness of his wife (vv.25, 28). Let him 'spoil' his wife, as one counsellor put it – not his children, but his wife – and, as long as it is understood what is meant by that, it is good advice. "The best way to be a good father to your children," said another counsellor, "is to be a good husband to their mother." That is so true, and, oh, that such a principle might be put into greater practice! I have often said to prospective bridegrooms in premarital counselling, and I will repeat it as often as I can, "Never let your wife-to-be know a single day when she is not very thankful that she is married to you!"

Of course, it works best the other way as well. Let a wife give herself fully and completely to the betterment and fulfillment of her husband also (vv.24, 33). As in all relationships, marriage is a two-way street; marriage prospers and grows increasingly better when both partners are fully committed to each other. I am not suggesting that any of us does this as fully or as consistently as one should. Remember, we are all sinners and our depravity has a way of displaying itself in even the most treasured relationships. Nevertheless, those husbands and wives who are most committed to each other have found the very course it takes to encourage each other in continuing to grow, to blossom and be fruitful in that

relationship. It is a simple fact of life that slackness in either partner encourages slackness in the other, and that generosity in either one also encourages generosity in the other. That is not the reason for generous giving, mind you, but it is one of its countless benefits.

As the passage before us makes so clear, marriage is all about giving – not taking, but giving – giving (and giving again) to each other, and those Christians who have learned to do so in marriage have entered what one more counsellor has described as “the hallowed halls of highest human happiness.”

With such an emphasis on giving, however, one might wonder if in time it will simply drain us of all our resources and leave us with nothing left to give. No, that is not so, and one can scarcely imagine anything further from the truth. If a husband and wife are giving themselves fully and unreservedly to each other, what each is receiving is many times greater, incomparably better and far more satisfying, than anything either one could ever take. Taking, you see, is losing, whereas the receiving that comes of someone else’s giving – love-filled giving – is winning, and it reaps the richest rewards that any friendship can produce.

Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her. In a few words that tells us everything we need to know about marriage, but we need to think that through and apply it. It may be that a husband will be called to lay down his own life for his wife, but mainly his calling is to live for her, to provide for her, to do that to the glory of God and to the end that they might both grow in their enjoyment of Him. This should not sound strange, for they have been made one after all (vv. 28-31), and why then should they not live as one?

It is true that it is only in this life that we are given in marriage to one another, that believers, men and women, will be joined to Christ Himself in the world to come (Revelation 19:9). Are you a Christian? If so, keep your eyes fixed on Christ and seek what is yet ahead. As every engaged couple looks forward to their wedding day, let us with even greater anticipation look forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb where, in His banqueting house and under the banner of His love, we will at last be presented faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy! “I nothing lack if I am His and He is mine forever.”