

March 10, 2013

Isaiah 61:10-11; 62:1-5 / Revelation 19:1-9 / Ephesians 5:28-31
 Becoming One: The Mystery of Marriage and The Church

All you have to do is skim this text to see that in it Paul weaves together TWO DISTINCT THEMES from beginning to end: The theme of the love, and the oneness, and relational union that does exist between Christ and His Church, and the theme of the love, and the oneness, and relational union that should exist between a husband and wife -- if they model their relationship with each other on their relationship with Him.

That's Paul's point in these verses. The spiritual union (or marriage) of the believer to Jesus, or Jesus to His Church, is the prototype or blue-print that lays the groundwork for how husband and wife are to relate to each other in marriage.

And it is funny when you think about it: Studying Christ (who never married!) is the way to achieve a healthy marriage! Christ Himself (who never married!) is the supreme example of how to relate within marriage! The way He loves and cares for us in our relationship with Him is the prototype for the way we should love and care for each other in our relationship with our spouses.

How does that work? The WIFE is to see the CHURCH as the model for herself (as is clear from v. 24) where Paul writes: **"As the church submits to Christ in everything, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."**

And the HUSBAND is to see CHRIST as the model for himself (as we see in v. 25) where Paul writes: **"Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave up His life for her..."** -- something he repeats again in v. 29.

And in seeking to grasp how all this works, and apply it, what we need to do is examine what Paul calls the, "profound mystery." The mystery of the union between Christ and His Church and how it is that that relationship is the key to understanding and maintaining marital health.

So let's begin **FIRST** in v. 29 where Paul writes: ***"After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds it and cares for it, just as Christ does the Church -- for we are members of His body."***

And though many people have tended to miss the connection, the key to this verse rests in this one truth: ***"No one ever hated his own body."*** (Or as I need to point out -- no healthy, well-adjusted, mentally stable person ever hated his own body, since we all know there are those, who because of guilt and neurosis and emotional instability, that have tried to hurt, maim or abuse their own bodies. Which means Paul's comment must be taken in the general sense.

Yet in saying, ***"No one ever hated his own body, but feeds and cares for it,"*** Paul is doing more than simply making a statement that is generally true. That's where many miss the point. Because what he's really doing is making a statement about Christ and the Church! Christ is included in the words: "No one..." and the "body" he does not "hate" is His Church -- as Paul essentially points out in the last part of v. 29, and in v. 30.

It's Paul's way of saying: "Christ **NEVER** hated (or never hates) his own Body, the Church, but "feeds it and cares for it." And we as believers are the ones who comprise that Body.

That's the truth that husbands must always keep in the forefront of their hearts and minds: Christ **NEVER** hated (or never hates) his own Body, the Church. And why must we always remember that? Because it affects how we treat our wives.

You see, I've heard messages suggesting that there are times when Christ somehow "hates" his church. They don't use the word "hate," but the picture they paint is precisely that -- He's angry, disgusted, irritated, or fed up with His Church -- especially at those times when the church becomes apathetic, sickly, falls into idolatry, embraces hypocrisy, neglects her duty, or goes whoring after wealth and worldly possessions.

Those times when she falls into the Laodicean error of being proud and smug and self-satisfied and self-exalting and thinking they don't really need Him. They border on suggesting Christ is fed up with the Church.

Yet, you know what happens if people actually believe that Christ could hate or reject His Church (especially when we understand that the model for husbands is Christ, and the model for wives is the church)? It would give husbands an excuse to follow what they think is Christ's example and do the same to their wives -- if their wives were to slack off, mess up, become sickly, act hypocritically, neglect their duty, and so forth.

It's true. If the model in Scripture for the WIFE is the Church and the model for the HUSBAND is Christ, it makes all the difference in the world what we believe about Christ's love for the Church and whether or not he is able to hate her! For if they mistakenly believe (due to poor theology) that Christ actually looks with hatred upon His Church -- because of her poor performance -- then he has ALL HE NEEDS to justify doing the same to his wife in their marriage.

But if he correctly understands -- as Paul states here, and affirms throughout the NT -- that Christ loves the church even if she's messing up, and or sickly, or doing her job as His Bride poorly... / If he correctly understands that Christ NEVER hates His Bride, His Body, the Church, for any reason, simply because it's His body and, "No one ever hated His own body" -- then that makes all the difference in the world concerning how he as a husband must view and treat his wife!

For it means that AT ALL TIMES -- even when he's upset with her, or feels she's doing wrong, or isn't respecting or appreciating him -- he must pause, and look at her, and view her, and treat her as Christ does the church -- *WHOM HE NEVER HATES!*

And I say to you: Think of the difference that would make in so many marriages! Think of what it would do to pause and remember at all times how very much Jesus loves and cares for His Church, and then apply that to your wife.

Think of what it would do in terms of decreasing and even eradicating such things as abuse, and harsh treatment, and hateful thoughts or hurtful language. Think of what it would do in terms of solidifying commitment, and causing a decline in abandonment, or divorce rates, and so many other marital ills.

Think of how differently many women would be treated, if their husbands heeded the words of Paul in this short text, and REFUSED to ever hate, reject, abuse, or treat their wives with indifference at any point / simply because Christ, their model, NEVER hates, rejects, abuses, or treats with indifference His Body and Bride the Church! A Body which He CANNOT hate, for to do so would be equivalent to Jesus hating Himself -- and we know that's not possible!

You see, for husbands it goes BEYOND simply caring for our wives as our own bodies or loving them as we do ourselves (which at times is very little)! This verse takes it to a whole new level! For it means I must view her not simply as one who is one with me and one whom I must love as I love myself, but as one who is one with Christ and one whom I must love just as Christ loves Himself!
And that is a whole different story!

So how do husbands improve how they VIEW and TREAT their wives? They study the Gospel, and meditate on the great love Christ has for the Church. They repeatedly consider that He died for her, is irrevocably committed to her, would never abandon her and will keep all the promises He has made to her -- loving her unconditionally.

For as Hoehner rightly points out: ***"In this context husbands are to love their wives even when they seem undeserving and unloving, or in other words, unconditionally."*** It's true. Christ loves the Church, and feeds the church, and cares for the church, and is always committed to His Church -- despite her many flaws -- giving husbands the model they are to follow.

So why is this not seen more in Christian marriages? I believe it has to do with the blatant neglect of churches in the past generation, teaching on how much Christ loves His Church! Not just us as individuals -- but the church worldwide! The whole church, made up of all believers everywhere.

So what happened? Churches -- starting back in the early and mid-20th century -- gave in to the ruggedly individualistic mindset of American culture and changed the emphasis found in Scripture, from God's love for His CHURCH, and Christ laying down His life for the CHURCH (v. 25) to God's love for the INDIVIDUAL / and Christ laying down his life for ME.

And interestingly, along with that change -- and almost step for step with that change -- went the stability of marriage, followed by an ever-growing the divorce rate.

Why? Because if my model for loving my wife is the great love Christ has for His CHURCH and preachers rarely speak of it or emphasize it (since many only care that "He loves ME") / then the entire Scriptural basis for the unconditional love of wives by their husbands, is not set before them, loses its impact and seemingly disappears!

That's the point! If the model for husbands is CHRIST, and the model for wives is the CHURCH, then a strong and repeated emphasis on the great love Christ has for the CHURCH, and the care He gives to His CHURCH, and the commitment He has to the CHURCH, could only result in healthier marriages.

Seeing and hearing and contemplating that truth on a regular basis could only lead to husbands being more faithful and committed and determined to stick by their wives through thick and thin -- because they're called to love their wives just as Christ loved the Church! Yet it's something you can't do, or will struggle to do, if you don't know, or aren't taught, or fail to grasp just how very much Christ loves His CHURCH!

Then **SECONDLY**, Paul goes on to say (quoting Genesis 2:24): ***"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a profound mystery -- but I am talking about Christ and the Church."***

And the question most people ask at this point is what on earth does Paul mean?? They follow the part about a "husband leaving his father and mother and being united to his wife" and the "two becoming one flesh" (through sexual union in marriage) and even grant that since that oneness goes beyond just sexual union, it is a mystery in regard to how all that happens.

But most struggle with the next line, since it throws a curve and catches people off guard -- even the one's who thought they were tracking with him!

Because for most -- the thought that Gen. 2:24 refers to Christ and the Church seems like a bit of a stretch.

So, what does Paul mean and why does he say it?

1st) He doesn't mean that marriage is a "mystery" in the sense that when a husband is joined to his wife, the human and divine are somehow joined (as the Catholic Church teaches).

In fact, you need to know these two verses (vv. 31-32) are the verses which the Catholic Church uses to justify their view that, "marriage a sacrament." And that the, "mystery" involved in it is that people are joined to God through marriage. Not just with each other, but the human to the divine, by and through marriage.

That is, marriage (as a sacrament) conveys salvific grace to those who are married by the Church. That's the "mystery." Marriage unites us to God, and thus assists in saving us. In fact, it is said to be an actual "reenactment" (not just a representation) of the marriage of Christ to the Church (just as in the Eucharist Christ is actually eaten and sacrificed all over again).

And where did that idea that marriage is a sacrament come from, since you are hard pressed to see it here? It comes mostly from the fact that in the Vulgate (or the earliest Latin translation of the Bible) Jerome translated the Greek word "musterion" or "mystery" as "sacramentum" or sacrament.

And though I admire the elevated sense that gives to the importance of marriage, it's NOT what Paul means. One is not saved, nor mysteriously joined to God, nor do they earn salvific merit by getting married in a Catholic Church. If Paul had meant that, he would have said that -- especially since it contradicts everything he says elsewhere about how one is saved.

Yet **2ndly)** we can also say that since this passage makes marriage a representation of the union between Christ and the Church, it definitely does elevate the union of husband and wife. Not to a saving status / but to a very honored status, being a symbol of something far greater than itself.

That's what Paul means. That just as all Scripture in some way points to Christ and is fulfilled by Christ, so also the same can be said for this verse about marriage. Marriage was created by God to serve the HIGHER FUNCTION of pointing to something far greater and far more wonderful than itself -- the intimate spiritual union and close, unseverable relationship, between Christ and His Bride, the Church.

The "mystery" therefore, is that even in the beginning, God placed in the created order a sign -- the intimate relational bond of marriage -- to point to, and foreshadow the relationship that would far exceed it in beauty and glory -- the believer's intimate union with Christ!

And not only that, but in revealing this "mystery," Paul also supplies us with a pattern for human marriage that transcends all cultural differences. As a missionary Paul knew and had seen that in different countries and different cultures there were all kinds of different views and different practices in regard to marriage -- some good and some very bad as I mentioned last week.

Yet by tying Christian marriage into the profound mystery of the union of Christ to His Church, Paul shows us that this view is not "culture bound." This is not one of many patterns, this is THE PATTERN or THE PROTOTYPE for all marriages, in all cultures, throughout all time!

No one will ever come up with a better or more healthy model -- because its modeled on the saving relationship with have with Christ! It's based in the eternal, trans-cultural and unalterable relationship which Christ has established with His Church in redemption, grace and salvation. And thus any changes made to it are not an improvement, but a digression.

Then **LAST**, I simply want to share one last thing in relation to the mystery of the two becoming one, because I feel it points to and confirms the reality of the biblical story of creation, the fall, and redemption.

You see, if we look at the creation account in Gen. 2 (which precedes the verse we've been looking at) we are told that God said, "***It is not good for man to be***

alone, I will make a helper fit for him." And as a result, God put Adam into a deep sleep, took a rib from his side, and with the rib he had taken from man, he created a woman.

And one of the things I've become more and more convinced of, as time goes on, is that the desire for man and woman to be joined as one sexually, is fueled by a deep, inner, mysterious, primordial, driving compulsion in our nature to join back together again what was separated in creation.

And Scripture confirms that in Gen 2:24 where God says (after separating Eve from Adam) that, ***"a man will leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."*** Having once been one, they will seek in marriage (and the sexual union in it) to become one once again.

Somehow, deep within us, we have this inner driving compulsion to join back together what God has split asunder. Somewhere, buried deep within the human psyche, is the unquenchable desire for the man and the woman to become one again -- as they were before God made the one into two!

In sexual union, man seeks to take back what was taken from him and woman seeks to be joined back to him from whom she came forth. In my mind it confirms the truth and reality of the creation story.

And that's not all. Another separation took place at that time which confirms the story of the Fall and the yearning for redemption. For in Genesis we see that God, man and the woman once dwelt in close, intimate, oneness and relational harmony.

Their hearts were filled with the sense of God's presence, and their souls delighted in the closeness and the intimacy they had with Him -- that is, until they sinned, and something inside them died -- as God had warned.

So again, two beings (the Creator and the created) who had once been joined as one in intimate fellowship, were separated -- leaving a gapping whole in the soul where God's presence had once been. And it's in this sense that the yearning for "salvation" that so many feel, is really little more than the drive to fill the space that was left empty when the Spirit of God departed from the human soul when it sinned.

And though marriage CAN seem to fill that gnawing sense of emptiness and inner loneliness to a degree -- it will always falls short. In fact, it was meant to fall short! Because as Paul tells us, it was always intended to be a symbol of something far better and far greater -- the union of the soul to God!

Marriage does join us back together -- person to person. But the deeper need and yearning of the soul is for the creature to be joined back to its Creator, the human to the divine -- which marriage symbolizes and represents, but is unable to bring about, since Paul has already told us in chapter 2:1-8, that the way one is joined to God is by grace, through faith in Christ, and NOT by getting married (not even in a church)!

So, whether we're married or not, or ever get married or not, our greatest need is the marriage of our spirit to the Holy Spirit! A marriage that comes to us by grace, through faith in Jesus, and fills the inner emptiness of the soul as the departed God returns to fill us with His Holy Spirit.

In fact, that's why many Christian people (like Paul) feel no need to get married after they've been married (by faith) to Jesus. Because that marriage -- the marriage of their soul to Jesus -- satisfies the inner longings of the human heart far more than earthly marriage ever could! For in that marriage the void left by God's departure from the soul is filled.

And I know this is odd to hear in a series on marriage -- but Paul's point is that marriage isn't simply meant to end with marriage! It's meant to point beyond itself to the marriage that exceeds it by far!

In fact, if marriage soothes the sense of inner loneliness and emptiness to the point that it makes life apart from Christ seem bearable and deters people from coming to Christ, then it has betrayed its God ordained purpose -- which was to point beyond itself to the marriage of Christ with His Church. And I have seen it. People who came to church seeking a husband or wife, found one, and I never saw them again.

LISTEN: Marriage is good, but salvation is infinitely better! Marriage is good, but if it keeps you from seeking to be joined to, or married to Jesus, then it has become an idolatrous relationship.

So I say to everyone here: ***The "profound mystery" is that God created marriage (from the beginning) to be a sign that points to the salvation that is in Jesus. He created the union of husband and wife (at least in part) to give us a taste of that which could be infinitely richer and far more fulfilling and satisfying -- the union of the believer with Jesus.***

And so I conclude by urging you to seek the marriage that does bring salvation -- the marriage of your soul to Christ by faith.