

October 6, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Cherish God's Gift of Family

Charles and Trudy (not their real names) had been married for well over 50 years. One night, Charles had a heart attack and ended up in the hospital. The next day, Trudy – tired from very little sleep and overwhelmed with worry – had a stroke. Their hospital rooms were literally right next to each other. After a bit, Charles was transferred to a rehab facility across the street from the hospital. Trudy was moved to a different wing of the hospital where they helped stroke victims. They were separated by a street. After a week or so, I spoke to a nurse who spoke to someone else who made some calls. They set a day and time for Trudy to come across the street to the rehab facility. As she was on her way, I was with Charles in his room. He shaved and put on a clean shirt. His wheelchair was in front of the mirror where he kept combing and recombining his hair, like a high school boy getting ready for his first date. Then I wheeled him into the meeting room. They wheeled Trudy next to him so they were side by side and facing each other. Then the nurses and I just backed away and watched love that had been nurtured over 50 years express itself. Charles and Trudy hugged and kissed and chatted. It was beautiful.

Family is part of God's perfect plan

That is the companionship God wanted when he established marriage in our first reading. Marriage is to be a lifelong union between one man and one woman. Marriage is to bring mutual happiness, to offer help and support, and, when it is his will, to provide a home where children can grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Adam was to be the loving leader who would gladly protect and provide for his family. Eve would be so touched by his love that she would say, "Great," to whatever he suggested. The children would learn from their parents. Everyone would be loving and supportive. No strife. No arguing. No bickering. That's the blessed family that God intended for his people in the perfection of Eden.

A quick comment about the word "submit" that Paul says wives are to do for their husbands. It's so often misunderstood. Submit does not mean slavery, or being less important, or inferior in any way. It simply means to let someone else decide something. A husband asks his wife where they should go to eat for their anniversary. She lists 3 of her favorite restaurants and asks what he would prefer. He suggests one and she says, "Great." The wife just submitted to her husband's decision. Notice, also, that the loving husband consulted his wife and did not force anything on her. That's the way God wants marriages to work.

In my humble opinion, aside from the plan of salvation, marriage and family is God's greatest idea ever. To have someone to share life's experiences with, to have someone to laugh and cry with, to count on when help is needed, etc. is a blessing you can't put a price on. Think of a family of parents and children laughing together around Christmas tree as they open presents. What joy! What a memory!

Sin ruined everything

As you know, Adam and Eve gave into temptation and ate the forbidden fruit. Suddenly, instead of cherishing his wife, Adam threw her under the bus and blamed her for his sin. Sin ruined God's gift of family. You see it every day. You have experienced it in your own lives. Sinful husbands and wives irritate each other and think bad thoughts about each other. They hold grudges. Some husbands do not treat their wife with love. Some wives ignore their husbands. Some husbands and wives are unfaithful as they break their marriage vows. Sometimes they yell and fight and throw things at each other. I just read a news story about a husband who suspected his wife of cheating, so he tied her up in the basement and used jumper cables to shock her and torture her. Just awful. Sometimes it happens that the marriage bond is broken and there is a divorce. Every divorce has sin as its cause. Breaking that family bond hurts everyone involved, especially the innocent children. You can think of all sorts of examples of ruined families. I can easily think of many times when I blew it as a husband and father. I wish I could relive those moments.

And children are not always such a cute joy and delight to their parents. Their sinful nature expresses itself with selfishness, greed and rebellion. Parents and children argue and fight and slam bedroom doors. How sad! There is no perfect husband, no perfect wife, no perfect children, no perfect parents, no perfect families. Sin has ruined everything. My heart aches for so many of you who suffer because your family was ruined by sin.

Jesus restored everything

Many divorces happen because of "irreconcilable differences," the husband and wife simply can't settle the issues between them. The greatest irreconcilable difference ever is between our holy God and sinful humans. Holiness and sin can not exist together. We were, you could say, divorced from God. But God could not stop loving us. In order to restore our relationship with us, God the Father sent Jesus to become fully human, born like any other baby, just like us. Jesus was the perfect mediator between our holy God and sinful humans. As human, he could be your substitute. As God he can connect to every person who ever existed. He let himself get blamed for every sin of the whole world as he hung on the cross and God punished him. Jesus

paid the price for every sin. Your debt with God has now been erased. Because of Jesus, the irreconcilable difference between God and us – sin – is removed. Your sins are forgiven. You are headed to heaven. The Bible even describes Jesus as the heavenly bridegroom and you, his people, are his bride. You are going to live happily ever after with him in paradise.

Here in Ephesians, Paul gives a beautiful description of what Jesus did for us (:25-27), “**Christ loved the church [believers] and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word [baptism], and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.**” When God looks at EACH OF YOU, whether you are married or single, child or adult, it’s like the bridegroom standing at the front of the church and smiling as he sees the world’s most beautiful woman in the world to him, wearing the most amazing wedding dress, walking down the aisle toward him to join her life with his. God says you are that bride. You are beautiful. You are perfect. He loves you and wants to spend eternity with you. As Paul discusses God’s blessing of family, he uses Jesus and his relationship with believers as the example of a Christian marriage. Just as Jesus was willing to die in order to save us, husbands are to be willing to die for their wives. We are, aren’t we? If there were only two spots left in the lifeboat, you would give them to your wife and child as you stayed on the sinking ship, right? And, just as believers appreciate Jesus’ dying love for them and gladly do what he tells them, wives are willing to follow their loving husbands. Through faith, selfishness in our hearts is replaced with love just like it was in the Garden of Eden. Jesus restored everything.

Christian family goals

Rejoicing in God’s saving love, we will cherish God’s gift of family. Paul began this section by saying (:21), “**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**” Cherishing God’s gift of family and living in our respective roles in our family is all about putting our faith into practice, remembering what Jesus has done for us and then reflecting his love to others. St. Paul gives us goals we can aim for in our Christian family lives.

Here in Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul aims at the issues that our sinful natures are most likely to rebel against. A husband’s sinful nature will most likely say, “I don’t want to sacrifice anything for my wife. I want her to serve me.” So Paul explains that sacrificing something for his wife is a way of saying “Thank You” to Jesus who sacrificed his life for him. And if Jesus died for you, then you can listen to your wife as she unwinds, spend time with her, give her a hug, tell her that you appreciate her, etc. A husband is to live like Christ, to be a walking, talking picture of Christ. If a man wants a

happy marriage, he will do what he can to make his wife happy. As they say, happy wife, happy life.

A wife’s sinful nature will most likely say, “I don’t want to submit.” Indeed, it is not always easy for a wife to respect her husband. He does not always remain the knight in shining armor he was while dating. He is not perfect. He is sinful, has weaknesses, makes mistakes, is messy. If the wife focuses on this, she’ll be miserable. So Paul points wives to the perfect love of Christ and explains that submitting is something that flows naturally in response to Christ’s love to her. Wives are to live like a Christian, to be a walking, talking picture of Christ’s beloved church.

Children will learn this loving Christian attitude from their parents. When they know that mom and dad love them and care about them, then they will obey their parents when they are told to do something. Paul tells fathers not to (6:4) “**exasperate**” their children, that is, provoke them to anger or frustration. That can happen when dad is too strict, or overly protective, or shows favoritism or is inconsistent with discipline. Father’s are to be loving leaders and examples.

Those of you who are single for whatever reason can still praise the Lord for the gift of a family. Everyone of you was born into a family. No matter how flawed or dysfunctional your family was, you still received blessings through it. Also, families around you need your prayers, your help, your encouragement more than ever. And, as a group of believers, you belong to a family of faith. Each and everyone of you is blessed and a blessing to everyone else here. That’s why it’s important for us to get to know each other, to enjoy our fellowship together. We need the support of each other to get through this life.

Because we will have our sinful natures until we get to heaven, we will continue to stumble and bumble into sin and hurt our families and loved ones. We are not glad for that. No excuses. We pray, “Lord, have mercy.” We do not always receive love from our wife or husband or parent or child, and so we especially need to keep filling ourselves up with Christ’s love so we have love to share. Marriage, family, relationships are going to take a lot of work and a lot of forgiveness and patience. Jesus not only saved us, he also energizes us and motivates us to love one another as he loved us. With Jesus as our Savior, we will strive to cherish God’s gift of family. Amen.