

Homily on Marriage, by St. John Chrysostom

A certain wise man, when enumerating which blessings are the most important included “a wife and husband who live in harmony (Sir. 25:1). In another place he emphasized this: “A friend or a companion never meets one amiss, but a wife with her husband is better than both.” (Sir. 40:23). From the beginning God in His providence has planned this union of man and woman, and has spoken of the two as one: male and female He created them (Gen. 1:27), and there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). There is no relationship between human beings so close as that of husband and wife, if they are united as they ought to be. When blessed David was mourning for Jonathan, who was of one soul with him, what comparison did he use to describe the loftiness of their love? Your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women (II Sam. 1:26). The power of this love is truly stronger than any passion; other desires may be strong, but this one alone never fades. This love (eros) is deeply planted within our inmost being. Unnoticed by us, it attracts the bodies of men and women to each other, because in the beginning woman came forth from man, and from man and woman other men and women proceed. Can you see now how close this union is, and how God providentially created it from a single nature? He permitted Adam to marry Eve, who was more than sister or daughter; she was his own flesh! God caused the entire human race to proceed from this one point of origin. He did not, on the one hand, fashion woman independently from man, otherwise man would think of her as essentially different from himself. Nor did He enable woman to bear children without man; if this were the case she would be self-sufficient. Instead, just as the branches of a tree proceed from a single trunk, He made the one man Adam to be the origin of all mankind, both male and female, and made it impossible for men and women to be self-sufficient. Later, He forbade men to marry their sisters or daughters, so that our love would not be limited to members of our families, and withdrawn from the rest of the human race. All of this is implied in Christ’s words: He who made them from the beginning made them male and female (Matt. 19:4). The love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together. Men will take up arms and even sacrifice their lives for the sake of this love. St. Paul would not speak so earnestly about this subject without serious reason; why else would he say, Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord? Because when harmony prevails, the children are raised well, the household is kept in order, and neighbors, friends and relatives praise the result. Great benefits, both for families and states, are thus produced. When it is otherwise however, everything is thrown into confusion and turned upside down. When the generals of an army are at peace with each other, everything proceeds in an orderly fashion, and when they are not, everything is in disarray. It is the same here. For the sake of harmony, then, he said, Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord....

Let us assume, then, that the husband is to occupy the place of the head, and the wife that of the body, and listen to what “headship” means: For the husband is the head of

the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church: and He is the Saviour of the Body. There fore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let wives be subject to their own husbands in everything. Notice that after saying the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, he immediately says that the Church is His Body, and He is Himself its Saviour. It is the head that upholds the well-being of the body. In his other epistles Paul has already laid the foundations of marital love, and has assigned to husband and wife each his proper place: to the husband one of leader and provider, and to the wife one of submission. Therefore as the Church is subject to Christ—and the Church, remember, consists of both husbands and wives—so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands, as to God.

You have heard how important obedience is; you have praised and marveled at Paul, how he welds our whole life together, as we would expect from an admirable and spiritual man. You have done well. But now listen to what else he requires from you; he has not finished with his example. Husbands, he says, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church. You have seen the amount of obedience necessary; now hear about the amount of love necessary. Do you want your wife to be obedient to you, as the Church is to Christ? Then be responsible for the same providential care of her, as Christ is for the Church. And even if it becomes necessary for you to give your life for her, yes, and even to endure and undergo suffering of any kind, do not refuse. Even though you undergo all this, you will never have done anything equal to what Christ has done. You are sacrificing yourself for someone to whom you are already joined, but He offered Himself up for one who turned her back on Him and hated Him. In the same way, then, as He honored her by putting at His feet one who turned her back on Him, who hated, rejected, and disdained Him as He accomplished this not with threats, or violence, or terror, or anything else like that, but through His untiring love; so also you should behave toward your wife. Even if you see her belittling you, or despising and mocking you, still you will be able to subject her to yourself, through affection, kindness, and your great regard for her. There is no influence more powerful than the bond of love, especially for husband and wife. A servant can be taught submission through fear; but even he, if provoked too much, will soon seek his escape. But one's partner for life, the mother of one's children, the source of one's every joy, should never be fettered with fear and threats, but with love and patience. What kind of marriage can there be when the wife is afraid of her husband? What sort of satisfaction could a husband himself have, if he lives with his wife as if she were a slave, and not with a woman by her own free will? Suffer anything for her sake, but never disgrace her, for Christ never did this with the Church....

Paul has precisely described for husband and wife what is fitting behavior for each: she should reverence him as the head and he should love her as his body. But how is this behavior achieved? That it must be is clear; now I will tell you how. It will be achieved if we are detached from money, if we strive above everything for virtue, if we keep the fear of

God before our eyes. What Paul says to servants in the next chapter applies to us as well, ...knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same again from the Lord (Eph. 6:8). Love her not so much for her own sake, but for Christ's sake. That is why he says, be subject...as to the Lord. Do everything for the Lord's sake, in a spirit of obedience to Him. These words should be enough to convince us to avoid quarrels and disagreements. No husband should believe any accusation he hears from a third party about his wife, and vice versa; nor should a wife unreasonably monitor her husband's comings and going, provided that he has always shown himself to be above suspicion. And what if you devote the day to your work and your friends, and the evening to your wife; but she is still not satisfied, but is jealous for more of your time? Don't be annoyed by her complaints; she loves you, she is not behaving absurdly—her complaints come from her fervent affection for you, and from fear. Yes, she is afraid that her marriage bed will be stolen, that someone will deprive her of her greatest blessing, that someone will take from her him who is her head.

A wife should never nag her husband: "You lazy coward, you have no ambition! Look at our relatives and neighbors; they have plenty of money. Their wives have far more than I do." Let no wife say any such thing; she is her husband's body, and it is not for her to dictate to her head, but to submit and obey. "But why should she endure poverty?" some will ask. If she is poor, let her console herself by thinking of those who are much poorer still. If she really loved her husband, she would never speak to him like that, but would value having him close to her more than all the gold in the world....Furnish your house neatly and soberly. If the bridegroom shows his wife that he takes no pleasure in worldly excess, and will not stand for it, their marriage will remain free from the evil influences that are so popular these days. Let them shun the immodest music and dancing that are currently so fashionable. I am aware that many people think me ridiculous for giving such advice; but if you listen to me, you will understand the advantages of a sober lifestyle more and more as time goes on. You will no longer laugh at me, but will laugh instead at the way people live now like silly children or drunken men. What is our duty, then? Remove from your lives shameful, immodest, and Satanic music, and don't associate with people who enjoy such profligate entertainment. When your bride sees your manner of life, she will say to herself, "Wonderful! What a wise man my husband is! He regards this passing life as nothing; he has married me to be a good mother for his children and a prudent manager of his household." Will this sort of life be distasteful for a young bride? Only perhaps for the shortest time, and soon she will discover how delightful it is to live this way. She will retain her modesty if you retain yours. Don't engage in idle conversations; it never profits anyone to talk too much. Whenever you give your wife advice, always begin by telling her how much you love her. Nothing will persuade her so well to admit the wisdom of your words as her assurance that you are speaking to her with sincere affection. Tell her that you are convinced that money is not important, that only thieves thirst for it constantly, that you love her more than gold; and indeed an intelligent, discreet and pious young woman is

worth more than all the money in the world. Show her that you value her company, and prefer being at home to being out. Esteem her in the presence of your friends and children. Pray together at home and go to Church; when you come back home, let each ask the other the meaning of the readings and the prayers. If you are overtaken by poverty, remember Peter and Paul, who were more honored than kings or rich men, though they spent their lives in hunger and thirst. Remind one another that nothing in life is to be feared, except offending God. If your marriage is like this, your perfection will rival the holiest of monks.

If we seek the things that are perfect, the secondary things will follow. The Lord says, Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you (Matt. 6:33). What sort of person do you think the children of such parents will be? What kind of person are all the others who associate with them? Will they not eventually be the recipients of countless blessings as well? For generally the children acquire the character of their parents, are formed in the mold of their parents' temperament, love the same things their parents love, talk in the same fashion, and work for the same ends. If we order our lives in this way and diligently study the Scriptures, we will find lessons to guide us in everything we need!