

Joint-Heirs of the Grace of Life

Text: 1 Peter 4:7-12

“Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For:

“Whoever desires to love life and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit;
let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” (quotes Psalm 34:12-16) (ESV)

Introduction:

I have promised to share something of what I have learned from forty years of marriage. I will try to keep my word. It is not as easy as one might think. Acquired wisdom becomes habitual and unconscious to the person possessing it until it is drawn out through inquiry. But if no one inquires, that wisdom through long years of application, may be invisible to the possessor, making it nearly impossible for him to identify it at will. If this is true of acquired wisdom it, is also true of acquired foolishness. We may persist in doing the wrong thing habitually, blind to the folly of our action, because it is so instilled in our behavior that we never question it. Unless such folly is called to our attention, and, we, being made aware of our error, make efforts to correct it, we may persist in it to our destruction all the while blaming something or someone else for our failure. Just as a skilled craftsman learns from the wisdom of others the best way to achieve the desired result in his work, and then repeats the required movements and operations until they become second nature to him; the wise person listens to those who have acquired skill in living, and applies those life skills, awkwardly at first, but through persistence with more and more facility until he achieves what the Bible calls wisdom. This is the reason that in the Old Testament the Hebrew the word *hokma*, “wisdom”, is applied to manual skill, as well as to life skills. Wisdom is essential in establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships with others, and of all the relationships of life, none is more important, enduring, and enriching than the union of a man and a woman in marriage.

We begin married life as an apprentice begins his apprenticeship. We are perhaps enthusiastic at the prospects, but it is as impossible for us to possess the hundreds of imbedded skills, necessary to a flourishing marriage, on our wedding day, as it is for an apprentice craftsman to possess the hundreds of instinctive movements, necessary to his trade, before he has picked up his first tool. Fortunately, for us, the marriage apprenticeship does not begin the day we say I do. Human relation skills are, at least partially, transferable. So if we have been blessed by good and wise parents, and other mentors, who have instructed us in life skills, we may be better prepared for the demands of married life than someone who has not been blessed with good examples, and wise mentors.

We can be sure, however, that when a married couple achieves a significant number of years of married life, with a relative degree of tranquility and joy, that they have been attentive students in the school of life. They have lived with open eyes and ears; open to each other, to the wisdom of others, but, most of all, open to God. This brings us to the first line of today's text: "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way" (I Pet. 3:7a). Peter's purpose in writing this letter was to instruct us in how to live as Christians in the world. He makes it clear that the world is imperfect, that it is not our ultimate home. We are sojourners who are called to live out our faith in a sometimes hostile environment. In the present passage he is particularly dealing with human relationships. He is especially concerned with how we relate to those who might be hostile to our faith. That is the reason when he advises wives, he especially addresses those wives who had unbelieving husbands, but when he turns his attention to the husbands he advises them on the basis that they have believing wives. The reason for this is, no doubt, that given the social structures of the first century, the wife would have almost invariably followed her husband in the faith, while the opposite was anything but certain.

Since I entered into marriage with a believing wife, and we were married as Christians, and we have lived our forty years of married life as Christians, it is from this perspective that I speak. I understand that that is not always the case, and I am certainly not unsympathetic to those who may be in a different position, but today I am speaking to you from my own experience, and that is an experience of Christian marriage, where, from the beginning we were in agreement that God is, that he has made himself known, and that his truth preempts all other pretenders to wisdom. We have certainly not always perfectly understood and applied that truth, but we have always lived by the conviction that it exists and that it merits our full and willing obedience. So when Peter says: "husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way", I understand him to be telling me not just to make every effort to understand my wife, but to apply myself to acquiring the wisdom of God, and then to apply that wisdom to my marriage. Understood this way, I don't think it would be inappropriate to apply the same instruction to wives. Christian wives, and husbands, should enter marriage as eager apprentices, seeking to

live together in the light of the wisdom of God, seeking to understand God's purposes in marriage, and his provisions for enabling us to realize, in our marriages, all that he intended from the time he first said "It is not good for man to be alone, I will make him a companion suited to him."

For the reason stated at the beginning, and because of the constraints of time, I certainly cannot share with you all that I have learned about marriage in the past forty years. Therefore, I will let the text provide the discipline and will speak from the text out of my own experience in sharing with you what I consider to be some of the more important realities of Christian married life.

I. Marriage is Good

My first point will be briefly made, not directly from the text, but as a necessary starting point. We must simply state at the beginning that marriage is good. It is good, because God has pronounced it good. It is good because it is according to God. It is proven good by the simple fact that the better marriage works the better a society functions, and that wide scale marriage failure results in cultural degeneration. One's own experience of marriage may be negative, but that is not a reason to blame the institution. Our failures are due to our own sin and incompetence. God, who is all wise, knew that humans would do best when one man would marry one woman and remain faithful to her as long as both lived; that they would "be fruitful and multiply" and would rear their children in "the nurture and admonition of the Lord", and that those children, thus taught, would do likewise. This is the ideal. We do not always achieve it, but we should always desire it. Proverbs 18:22 states the fact precisely in a minimum of words: "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord." This being true, the advice of Proverbs 5:15-23 should not be forgotten:

Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress? For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths. The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.

It should be unnecessary to belabor this point, but we live in a world where the most obvious truths of human society are being turned on their heads. If it is any help or comfort, we are not the first Christians to face such cultural upheaval. The early Gentile Christians had to defend not just the goodness of marriage, but the goodness of birth and life. Pessimism and philosophy, falsely understood, had so affected the culture of the

Roman Empire that it was not uncommon for the philosophers to say that it would be better not to be born. The earliest complete book on Christian marriage comes from Clement of Alexander in the 2nd century. It is not, as we might think, based on the instructions concerning marriage in the New Testament Epistles, a handbook on marriage relations, but rather an apologetic for marriage itself. Many, because of the false ideas borrowed by the Gnostics from the philosophers, had come to deny the goodness of the creation. They attributed it not to God, but to an evil lesser god. They believed that only the soul mattered, they rejected God's creation, including his creation of marriage as something good. They then went to two extremes, both of which are already detectable in the New Testament. Some used the belief to justify license, going to great lengths to prove from the Scriptures that men were simply to live as animals and take whatever woman they desired. The other extreme taught that the celibate life was far superior to the married life, an insidious idea that still persists in some forms of Christianity. So Clement had to write an entire book just to prove that marriage is good. We need similar apologists in our time, people who will prove to the world by argument and by example that marriage is a God-given institution, that it is good, and that we neglect it to our peril.

II. Our Spiritual Life and Development is Rooted in the Marriage Relationship

For a second lesson let us return to the words of the text: "for they are heirs together with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered". Peter has referred to the wife as the "weaker vessel", a term that has entered into the everyday language of many. What is important for us to see is that he is emphasizing the wife's spiritual equality. The wife may be physically weaker, and woman's physical inferiority is a given in all the writings of the 1st century, but according to Peter she is his spiritual equal, equally the object of God's grace and of the hope of eternal life that that grace brings. He is telling us, and I would agree wholeheartedly, that you cannot neglect your spouse and not neglect your soul. This was the error of some of the early Christians that I mentioned earlier. They found that marriage was not spiritual, so they avoided it or neglected it that they might concentrate on the spiritual life. This came out in strange ways sometimes. Origen, another 2nd century church father, said that one should not pray in bed, since that is where the marriage act took place. He was a brilliant man and extremely knowledgeable in the Scriptures, but he must have missed Hebrews 13:4 "marriage is honorable and the bed undefiled."

Such ideas are based on a false idea of creation, and a skewed concept of spirituality. First, let it be said, that God created us physical beings, that the object of his salvation is body and soul, that the body will be resurrected. All that God created he pronounced good, and what he does not reject we should not reject. Secondly, the ultimate goal of the spiritual life is not mystical contemplation, but charity lived out in the real physical created world.

Now, if the goal of the spiritual life is love or charity, what better school is there than the school of marriage and family. For in marriage we vow to love one person unconditionally through all the changes and vicissitudes of life. Marriage is God's school *par excellence* of charity. It may be romantic love that brings a couple together, but it will be charity that keeps them together. When we grow together "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" we learn what it means to love as God loved; to love, not only when the beloved is lovely and loveable, but also when loving is beyond human ability and can only be a gift of grace. That love, which is the ultimate expression of Christian spirituality, is best developed in the married couple; it then spills over to the children born of the union, and finally becomes a blessing to all who come in contact with its influence.

We do not put limits on God, and if in some cases he chooses to do otherwise, and uses other means to teach charity, the exception only proves the rules. God calls us to lives of charitable love. His most important school of love is a committed marriage relationship where both partners take their vows seriously and seek to love one another as they have promised. As they learn to love one another, they begin to learn all of the dimensions of God's love, and having so learned, they become a source of blessing to others. This is God's normal way, and we should embrace it without reserve.

III. God's Rules for Human Relationships Must First be Applied with our spouses

In the Scripture reading, we read through verse 12 of I Peter 3. Technically, his instructions for husbands and wives end at verse seven, and verse 8 begins a new paragraph which is addressed to Christians in general: "Finally all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called that you may obtain a blessing." Having given these general instructions to all believers he supports them by quoting from Psalm 34, a wisdom psalm, the following words:

"Whoever desires to love life and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit;
let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." (quotes Psalm 34:12-16) (ESV)

In the larger passage he has been giving instructions to specific categories of people as to how to live as “aliens and exiles” (3:11). He gives instructions to them, first as citizens, then to slaves or servants, next to wives, then to husbands, and finally to all.

My final observation, and it has been an important one for me is that all of the instruction that has been given to us as Christians as to how we should live and treat others begins with those nearest to us, our wives, husbands, and children. If the New Testament does not contain that much specific instruction for husbands and wives, it is because most of it would be redundant. We begin simply by acting as Christians, by respecting the commands of Christ and the Apostles in our homes, by giving special attention to treat those nearest and dearest to us according to Christ’s rule of love.

It is for this reason that the second paragraph we have read, and many similar paragraphs in the Old and New Testaments, have everything to do with the marriage relationship, because they teach us how to treat one another. The argument here is from the minor to the major. If we are to treat all in this way, then how much more should we give even greater attention to treat the one that we have vowed to love and care for as long as we live according to the same principles. We will make great progress in our relationship with our spouses, and bring joy and tranquility to our lives when we begin to make a conscious effort to treat our spouses according to all of the teaching of the Gospel.

From our text let me take just one example from the quotation of Psalm 34 which begins with an affirmation that can be turned into the question: “Who would love life and see good days?” or we might paraphrase it “Who would like to experience the best life possible for as long as he can?” I take just the first part of the response as an example of the principle that I have tried to establish, notably, that the law of Christ is to be first applied in the family, and especially with our spouses. The response then is: “let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile.”

I take this as an example. Many other could be given, but this one is important. Master language. Learn to speak to one another properly. So much damage could be avoided if spouses simply spoke to one another in a Christ like way. This is true both negatively and positively. Paul tells us to avoid all corrupt speech, but also to speak words of grace, words that build up and communicate grace to the hearer. Husbands and wives must not exaggerate. They must avoid name calling. So much damage is done by words. If we could control our words, we would avoid much destruction.

I count it a great blessing that both my wife and I grew up in families where we were held accountable for what we said. Certain words were not to be pronounced. That was a good preparation for marriage. We both came to marriage having already acquired the habit of avoiding excessive language. I am sure that that habit, which we have both continued to maintain, has saved us more grief than we know. It has not kept us from being angry or displeased with one another, but it has disciplined us to express our anger and displeasure in acceptable ways. What has been harder, but is equally important is to learn to speak the truth

in love, to be honest without being hurtful, to make our words, words that encourage, build up, and help the other grow. Learn to use the right words, to express yourself precisely, to not say more than needs to be said, and certainly to avoid all that is ugly and hateful. This is true in all human relationships, but especially true with the one that is dearest to you. This is but one example of the principle, but I hope that it helps you understand that all that the Bible teaches about our relations with other people has first and direct application with our spouses.

Conclusion:

We must conclude. More could be said, but these three things I affirm on the basis of Scripture, Christian teaching, and 40 years of experience.

Marriage is good and God has pronounced it so. He who finds a wife finds a good thing. I was not really looking when I found mine. I am not sure about whether God has only one picked out for us or if he gives us a choice, but I do know that in my case he directed my path. I would not have chosen so wisely, but I give Him thanks for giving her to me.

Marriage, properly entered into and properly lived out, is a great source of spiritual growth and development, because it teaches us dimensions of charity that we would most likely not learn otherwise. I could never have become the person I am alone, for I was not created to be alone. God created us male and female. It is in the marriage relationship that I am becoming what God intended me to be. Marriage is, in simple words, a means of grace.

The law of Christ must first be applied in my relationship with my spouse. This seems like a simple observation, but experience has taught me that it is often neglected. As we learn to act towards our spouses motivated by the love of Christ, we learn how to act towards all. The family is our first school of Christian living.

I assure you that if you will act on these three principles you will be better for it. Your marriage will flourish, and not only will you be blessed, but you will become a source of blessing to others.