

Reflections on Marriage

By St. John Chrysostom

Some say that marriage was ordained by God as a blessing to the human race. Others say that marriage is a necessary evil for those who cannot restrain their sexual appetites. In truth it is impossible to speak in such ways about marriage in general; we can only make judgments about particular marriages. There are some marriages which bring great blessings to the husband and the wife, to their children, and to all their neighbors. But there are other marriages which seem to bring few blessings to anyone.

The differences between these two types of marriage lies in the spirit with which the bond was forged and is maintained. If a man and a woman marry to satisfy their sexual appetites, or to further the material aims of themselves or their families, then the union is unlikely to bring blessings. But if a man and a woman marry in order to be companions on the journey through earth to heaven, then their union will bring great joy to themselves and to others. Some people need a close companion, and for these people God has ordained marriage. Some do not need a close companion, and for these people God has ordained celibacy.

When we speak of the wife obeying the husband, we normally think of obedience in military or political terms: the husband giving orders and the wife obeying them. But while this type of obedience may be appropriate in the army, it is ridiculous in the intimate relationship of marriage. The obedient wife does not wait for orders. Rather, she tries to discern her husband's needs and feelings, and responds in love. When she sees her husband is weary, she soothes him; when he is ill, she nurses and comforts him; when he is happy and elated, she shares his joy.

Yet such obedience should not be confined to the wife. The husband should be obedient in the same way. When she is weary, he should relieve her of her work; when she is sad, he should cherish her, holding her gently in his arms; when she is filled with good cheer, he should also share her good cheer. Thus a good marriage is not a matter of one partner obeying the other, but of both partners obeying each other.

A good marriage is like a castle. When husband and wife truly love and respect each other, no one can overcome them. If a man is unmarried and is attacked with lies and slander, his confidence and self-esteem may crumble. But if he had a loving wife, she would reassure him with the truth, and so uphold his spirit. If a woman is single and is the subject of vicious gossip, she may feel that her reputation is being cut to shreds. But if she had a loving husband, his faith in her goodness and honesty would both comfort her and also impress those who doubted her.

Similarly, a good marriage is like a buttress when a person's religious faith is shaken. Single people who are beset by religious doubts may feel that the house of God is collapsing around them, and that they are helpless to prevent it. But married people can turn to their spouse to express those doubts; and it is almost certain that the spouse's faith is sufficiently solid to allay those doubts. In the providence of God, when a husband is spiritually weak, his wife is spiritually strong; when a wife is weak, the husband is strong.

The above excerpts by St. John Chrysostom have been taken from *On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom* (1996), compiled by Robert Van de Weyer.