

Marriage is not a Cross
Advice for a Long and Happy Marriage
by Pastor Rolf Preus
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When I was a little boy, my father taught his children certain, shall we say, contemporary religious songs that didn't quite make the cut for use in the Sunday school. The first verse of one of those songs went like this:

Adam was the first man that ever was invented,
Couldn't live alone and keep himself contented;
So he pulled out a rib and made himself a spouse;
Starting raising Cain and started keeping house.

We all know the children's rhyme that concludes with the words:

First comes love,
Then comes marriage,
Then comes baby in the baby carriage.

From childhood we learn to associate love, marriage, and children. And well we should. The first blessing with which God blessed Adam and Eve was the promise of children, as Moses writes:

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. (Genesis 1:27-28a)

The account of God making a woman out of the man's rib is provided in the next chapter and it is to it that we most frequently turn when we seek instruction on marriage, the duties of husbands and wives, and such things. But chapter one comes first and establishes the foundation for what follows. Immediately after saying that the man and the woman are made in the image of God, Moses speaks of God blessing them and promising them children.

God blesses and says, “Be fruitful and multiply.” The words, “Be fruitful and multiply” are not a law command. They are a blessing from God. God is not laying down the law. He is telling them to enjoy the intimacy by which he would bring them the fruit of the womb and he is telling them that children are a blessing.

Love, marriage, and babies are all blessings. People don’t believe this. Some don’t believe this because they are narcissists in love with themselves and unwilling to be saddled with any responsibility for another human being such as a spouse or a child. This is the godless denial.

The godless denial has invaded the church as men and women, without getting married, live together enjoying the intimacy that God has placed within marriage. They often attend church and go to the altar to eat and drink the body and the blood of Jesus. Their pastors should kindly but firmly explain to them what fornication is and that fornicators do not inherit the kingdom of God. A church that cannot take a stand against fornication cannot credibly support the divine institution of marriage.

Then there is the religious denial that marriage and children are blessings from God. This is harder to deal with because it is not promoted in the name of selfishness and lust but out of a deep but twisted sense of piety. The religious denial has gained credibility among us Lutherans and has led many astray. It is more subtle than the godless denial. The godless openly despise God’s good gifts. The religious denial comes from those exceptionally pious Lutherans who believe, deep down in their hearts, that in order to be pious one must enjoy misery and pain. They don’t sneer at God’s gifts. They grin and bear them.

Oh, these Lutherans! They are incurable Pietists. Twenty years ago they were wandering away from genuinely Lutheran piety and worship into the generic mass of conservative Protestantism, tossing away their Lutheran liturgy, trashing traditional Lutheran offices, and institutions, and taking spiritual gifts inventory tests so they could learn how to pester their pastors with their giftedness to do busy body religious stuff by which the church would allegedly grow – into what, we never knew!

That this enthusiasm would subside and be replaced by an emphasis on vocation was met with solemn relief in every orthodox Lutheran heart! Ah, but we counted our chickens before they hatched, and what hatched from what appeared to be the renewal of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation was just another form of pietism even more oppressive than the one it replaced.

I will prove it to you. You heard the word vocation and started looking at your watch. Admit it! You prove my point. If you're feeling uncomfortable, it's not because you think that the doctrine of vocation is boring, but because when you hear vocation you think of suffering. Vocation is a cross. That means marriage is a cross. That means children are a pain in the, well, I think you know what this means!

Well, we have to find someone to blame. I think I have found the culprit who helped to frame the concept of vocation and with it the institution of marriage in terms of suffering and pain. His name is Gustaf Wingren. He wrote a book called Luther on Vocation. I read it. Well, not all of it, but some of it. Enough of it to learn that vocation, and this includes marriage, is lived under the cross. Here is Wingren telling us what Luther says:

Man's position between earth and heaven implies that he does not expect only good fortune on earth, but is prepared in advance to suffer "the cross" and tribulation of this world. Some refrain from marriage and live in whoredom, thus assuming less responsibility. "That is true enough. For he who assumes that there will be no other life after this one, as some do, acts sensibly enough to seek satisfaction in promiscuous prostitution, rather than take upon himself the cares of the married state." But a Christian is happy to take a wife. "For since a Christian expects another life to follow this one, it is very sensible for him to accept here days that are less good, and thereby to have eternally the purest good of the days that are to be in the life to come."¹

Or, as the famous lay theologian and country western singer, Marty Robbins, sang in his Grammy winning ode to marriage and his long suffering wife:

When she reaches that river
Lord, you know what she's worth
Give her that mansion up yonder
'Cause she's been through hell here on earth.

Lord, give her my share of Heaven
If I've earned any here in this life
'Cause God, I believe she deserves it
My woman, my woman, my wife.

The life of marriage and children is a miserably wretched existence to be borne patiently until God takes us to heaven where we will be relieved of it.

I don't buy it. Let us examine Wingren's thesis that marriage is a cross to bear. With a name like Gustaf, he must be a Swede. Being a Swede, he was probably married to one. Lutherans ask: What does this mean? Since 99.44% of all Swedes are Pietists, and since feminism is a form of pietism, and since Swedish men are notoriously taciturn while Swedish women have the vocation of helping their husbands find true piety in the observance of the many unwritten rules of Scandinavian Lutheranism, it follows – by irrefutable logic – that poor Gustaf had, in his marriage, his own cross to bear. When life serves you lemons it sours you just a little bit![2](#)

But marriage is not a cross! We all have our crosses to bear. We are sinners living in a fallen world who carry around in our bodies the sin, sickness, death, doubts, and frailties of our fallen condition. We daily confront the contradiction between what God promises us in Christ and what we see with our own eyes and feel in our dying bodies. There are many crosses we must bear, but marriage is not one of them.

Marriage is a wonderful estate. We are familiar with the biblical metaphor of Christ as the heavenly bridegroom and the church as his holy bride. Christ loves his bride, the church, and gives himself for her, washing her clean of all her sin. The church is devoted to her Lord Jesus, and trusts in him for her salvation. It is a beautiful metaphor. The Bible also refers to the church as a

flock and a building and other such things, but without the intent to teach us about caring for sheep or building buildings. But when St. Paul provides us with his beautiful description of the love of Christ for his church and the church's submission to Christ, he is talking about marriage between a man and a woman. Marriage is a blessing. It is not a curse. It is not a cross. It is not a burden. It is the most wonderful estate you can imagine.

Let me talk just a bit about my own marriage. My wife, Dorothy, and I were married almost forty years ago. We were young, in love, in college, away from our home churches, with no pastor. So we got no premarital counseling. My father married us. I don't think he gave us any advice at all, but he did know a guy in Chicago who got me a very good deal on a beautiful diamond ring that my wife has been wearing since January 1, 1974.

Advice for a long happy marriage falls under two general categories, so the remainder of my little talk with you will assume two parts. Part one, you must choose the right wife or husband. Part two, you must live with her or him.

Choosing the right wife is extremely important. I had three criteria that have been confirmed as sound by my own experience over the past forty years. She must be pretty, she must be orthodox, and she must have a good disposition.

It is true that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The fact that my wife is objectively good looking is beside the point. What matters is that I believe she is beautiful. One could argue that the bride of Christ is rather ugly, oozing with sin that exists deep within as a radical ferment yielding various evils of word and deed. That's ugly. But Jesus sees none of that. To him she is a glorious church without spot or wrinkle or sin of any kind, but holy and without blemish. This is what Jesus thinks of his church. This is what Jesus says of his church. What he says is so because he says it. So then, the church is beautiful.

Jesus thinks the church is beautiful. Rolf thinks that Dort is beautiful. If you don't believe your wife is beautiful you're arguing with God. I know that my wife is beautiful because God gave her to me – she is a gift from God, that's

what Dorothy means – and God is good. We Lutherans reject every form of Manicheanism that would deny the goodness of the Creator and his creation.

She must be orthodox. The very idea of becoming one flesh with a devotee of false doctrine should fill every pious Christian heart with revulsion. The body in which we live and the body to which we are joined as one flesh are created by the God whose every word is food for our souls. It is true that marriage belongs to the civil, and not the spiritual estate. It is true that marriage, while signifying the union of Christ and his church, is not a sacrament. It is true that a Christian has no right to divorce an unbeliever just because he's an unbeliever. But it is also true that nowhere is the mutual sharing of the gospel more necessary than in the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage and in their raising of the children God gives them.

She must have a good disposition. Consider the alternative. Solomon writes in Proverbs 21:9 & 19,

It is better to dwell in the a corner of a housetop,
Than in a house shared with a contentious wife.

It is better to dwell in the wilderness,
Than with a contentious and angry woman.

And in Proverbs 27:15-16,

A continual dripping on a very rainy day
And a contentious woman are alike;
Whoever restrains her
Restrains the wind
And grasps oil with his right hand.

A wife with a sweet disposition is a precious gift from God. It doesn't mean she isn't opinionated, assertive, and strong. Don't misunderstand sweetness. It runs deeper than that. It is a deep-seated attitude of gentleness and respect.

So then, choose a wife who is pretty, orthodox, and sweet. To the ladies, I would give similar advice. Above all, don't marry a heathen. Don't marry a man who won't go to church with you, lead the family in prayer, and confess the truth with you. A woman who marries an unbeliever in the hope that she will convert him is not only a fool but an arrogant one at that. If he confesses the faith but doesn't show any interest in learning it, he won't have any interest in teaching it to his children. Why would you want to marry a man who cannot bring up your children in the true faith? Don't you love your own children? And if he goes to church to please you instead of to receive the benefits God gives him then he obviously places you above God. Why would you want to marry an idolater?

If he beats you, don't marry him. If he's a drunk, don't marry him. Remember: what you see is what you get and he's not going to change just because you want him to. He is what he is. If you cannot submit to him the way he is, don't marry him.

This brings us to part two. You must live with her. You must live with him. Marriage is not a cross to bear. But you married a sinner. Sin corrupts what is good. If it weren't good, sin couldn't corrupt it. Do not confuse corruption with what is corrupted. Marriage is good. Selfishness, malice, lust, greed, self-centeredness, and reckless irresponsibility prevail in the lives of married people to make it appear that marriage is not what God says it is. That's the nature of every demonic deceit. Satan corrupts what is holy and then points to his corruption as the reason to reject God's good gift. It's a lie.

If you want to know the secret to a happy marriage you must not only believe that marriage, as an institution, is a good thing and that the children with which God blesses this union are genuine wealth and true blessings, you must also know the gospel.

Last Sunday was Quasimodogeniti. Luther preached several sermons on the Gospel for the day, from John 20 where Jesus breathed on his disciples, told them to receive the Holy Spirit, and gave them the authority of the keys, to forgive and retain sins. We Lutherans appeal to this text as the divine institution of the pastoral office. Luther also makes the point that whoever

has the Holy Spirit has the authority to forgive sins. You don't have to be a pastor. You can be a wife or a husband. The authority to forgive your spouse is God's power to heal your marriage.

There is nothing more important to the health and happiness of your marriage than this. Of the seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer, only one contains a promise on our part. That promise is to forgive the sins of those who sin against us. We Lutherans have always taught that the central topic of the Christian religion is justification by faith alone, that is, the doctrine that God forgives us all our sins freely for the sake of Christ's obedience and suffering and that we receive this forgiveness and are justified before God, not by doing anything good, but simply by believing in Christ our Redeemer. If the central truth of our faith is the free forgiveness of our sins, then forgiving those closest to us – especially those to whom God has joined us as one flesh – must be at the center of our lives.

Husbands, imitate Christ. For whose sake did Christ humble himself and become obedient all the way to his death on the cross? It wasn't for his sake. It was for our sake. So it is with your work. If your work is your life remember that your life is your wife's life. She took your name, she bears your children, she entrusts herself to you. Don't pick on her. Don't point out her faults. See her as the beautiful bride God sees his church to be.

Wives, imitate the church. Submit to your husbands, as to the Lord. If your husband doesn't deserve it, your Lord Jesus does. A woman who shows respect to her husband honors Christ. It is no burden to respect the One who loved you and gave himself for you.

Above all else, forgive each other. Forgive from the heart without accusing. Forgive for Christ's sake. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Act as if your husband or wife is sinless and righteous before God. For that is what the gospel teaches us. The gospel is what makes marriage sweet.

¹ Luther on Vocation, by Gustaf Wingren, translated by Carl C. Rasmussen, Reprinted by Ballast Press, 1994 by permission of Gustaf Wingren, pages 164-165

² Being mostly of Norwegian extraction, I have taken the liberty of making fun of Scandinavian Lutheranism. It is meant in jest.

