

“It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.” (Gen 2:18)

✠ Lecture XIX: The Sacrament of Matrimony ✠

Marriage is and has been a universal practice for almost every civilized culture throughout history, yet it is considered to be a Sacrament in the Orthodox Church. A Sacrament is a visible form of an invisible grace, it's a *mystery*, an open door through which mankind passes from the realm of the physical and earthly, into the reality of the spiritual and heavenly – the realm of communion with God. A Sacrament is seen through the context of created reality (for example, wine and bread in the Eucharist, water in Baptism, and oil in Confirmation, etc...). This created reality is then projected into the Kingdom of God and transformed into a higher reality, which belongs to the spiritual realm. As a result of Lord Jesus Christ's work of redemption, marriage is raised to a new level that transcends human procreation and legal contracts.

Marriage is, on one level, a created reality, which is indeed a universal practice. Men and women are attracted to each other, fall in love, and marry. But this created reality of marriage can be assumed into the Kingdom of God and sanctified. When a man and a woman come to the Church to be married, they are experiencing the transfiguration of their earthly marriage into the reality of the Kingdom of God. In the Holy Gospel according to **St. John 2:1-11**, we read about Lord Jesus Christ attending a wedding ceremony in Cana of Galilee. In being at this wedding and in performing His first miracle there, Lord Jesus Christ forever blesses marriage and sets it apart as “sanctified” way of life. This first miracle performed by the Lord at the wedding of Cana of Galilee is also symbolic; the transformation of water into wine is symbolic of the Sacramental transformation of the earthly reality of marriage into something heavenly and spiritual. (Adapted from an article by Fr. John Meyendorff)

Marriage, as a Sacrament, belongs to an entirely different order than the mere union of man and woman through civil contract. It basically regards a husband and wife as symbols of another marriage; namely, the marriage of Lord Jesus and the Church:

- “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord ... therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.” (**Eph 5:22,24**)
- “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it ... so husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.” (**Eph 5:25,28-29**)

✠ Institution of the Sacrament:

Holy Scripture does not explicitly mention when our Lord instituted this Sacrament. Nevertheless, some fathers have said that He instituted it when He attended and blessed the wedding at Cana of Galilee (**Jn 2:1-11**) others have said that the Lord instituted it during His discussion with the Pharisees about divorce when He said, “What God has joined together, let no man separate.” (**Mt 19:6**)

→ In any case, St. Paul explicitly calls marriage “a great mystery [Sacrament]” (**Eph 5:32**)

✠ Characteristics of an Orthodox Marriage:

- No mixed marriages: “Do not be equally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God.” (**2 Cor 6:14-16**)
- Monogamy: “Let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.” (**1 Cor 7:2**)
- Divorce is allowed **only** for sexual immorality reasons, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (**Mt 19:9**)

✦ **The Goal of an Orthodox Marriage:**

Very often couples get married for the purpose of filling certain needs that they have in their own personal lives. Therefore, they come to marriage expecting happiness, emotional well-being, personal satisfaction – without even having to work for them. When they don't get these things, they feel cheated or blame their spouse. As Orthodox Christians, we approach marriage very differently. The goal of marriage is not the fulfillment of one's needs; rather, the ultimate goal of marriage is heaven.

✦ **FAQ:**

Q1: St. Paul said, “The unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband” (1 Cor 7:14) Is St. Paul permitting the marriage to unbelievers?

A1: St. Paul is talking to people who believed and were already married yet their spouses did not accept the faith. He said before the above verse, “If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him” (1 Cor 7:12-13) then he said, “if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases” (1 Cor 7:15)

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*The Church Sacraments*’ by Habib Guirgess.