

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

Dr. Richard M. Cromie

Sixty Coconut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

March 9, 2003

**“THERE IS NO PERFECT HUSBAND –
HA, HA, HA, HA, HA”**

TEXT: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved
the church and gave himself up for her.”

Ephesians 5:25

When first proposed, the title of this sermon was phrased as a simple declarative sentence, a comment of fact. It was not intended to alarm or to incite laughter among the neighbors, nor was it to stir up hurtful, harmful or long buried feelings about those of the male gender of the human race. It was at the start just a proper homiletical stroke of good fortune for a preacher who in his retiring years, shall we call them, had landed on a new idea, a rare stroke of good fortune these days. It could have been just plain luck. But, at least it was a new approach to the opening topic of a three part series of sermons on Christian marriage in the twenty-first century...Anyway this sermon in its embryonic stages was titled simply: “There is no perfect husband.”

Now what could possibly be wrong with that? It would have caused many to think about life and its blessings. Some overly egocentric males would have disagreed perhaps. A few on the charming distaff side might have shouted a proper Baptist “Amen Rev, that’s right!” And generally, as sermons tend to go these days, it would have settled quietly over the flock like a descending cloud of soporific heavenly peace, alas almost everyone would have gone home happily, and if nothing else, rested and refreshed.

But then, I, the Preacher, happened to mention the title to a particular person I know, as a possibility for pulpit fare come one fine and future date, “What would you think of a topic

called, “There is no perfect husband?””, I asked ponderously, not really seeking advice. (Now let me digress to share with you wives and girl companions within the sound of my voice, lest you stumble and fall into one of the one thousand, three hundred and seventy-two traps of marital communication. When a (man) husband asks for advice, he is not really asking for your opinion; nor is he seeking an intelligent response, like normal people might. He is actually longing for some reinforcement of how insightful and intelligent he is. He already knows the answer; or at least he knows the answer he wants to hear, the ones like mommy used to give him. So, what should you do, you might be asking? Either wait and watch until he answers the question himself, which he soon will; or you can ponder silently for a little while, pretending to be thinking, then parrot back the answer he is waiting to hear. Easy.)

In my case, the person I was speaking to, long accustomed to these not so rare occasions of marital conversation, didn’t say anything at all, not a word, not at first. Finally she repeated my topic, then laughed and laughed out loud, five times longer than the five “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha’s” listed as part of the sermon topic in your program today. In answer to my question she replied “There is no perfect husband. That’s a good one – ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” (Exclamation point entered!)

So, even though I got straight A’s in my homiletical courses on “The Art of Preaching”,

forty-five years ago or so, I bowed humbly and allowed her the respect her attempt at frivolity deserved. I retitled my proposed sermon to coincide with her hilarious suggestion. Hence you see, and soon will hear its completed version today! Oh dearie me.

Recently, since we announced the revised subject in the official listing of future sermons, the topic has caused some small stir around the Chapel environs, in the more vocal corners of the Parish anyway. One man volunteered to stand up as a living testimony that the title is incorrect. Other men listening will be shocked to learn that only one woman complained that the title is "demeaning to men," was her phrase I think. She said that the husband she one day hoped to find (you see, she is still single) would be a perfect specimen, but as a sop to the Pastor, she conceded that even she liked the "Ha, ha, ha" part.

I think there were one hundred thirty-seven other men (I lost count) who told me that they were the exception to the rule. "Why just ask my wife," one brave hirsute olde husband advised "and she will tell you!" His poor wife of thirty-six years gulped on her mash potatoes so violently that I nearly had to try my newly learned Heimlich maneuver on her... A perfect husband, who can find?

Did you ever hear the story about the Baptist preacher in Biloxi who in trying to make a point about Original Sin, once asked his congregation if anyone present knew of a perfect man. He said "If you know a perfect man or if you are a perfect husband, please stand up. I would like to meet you." Of course no one stood up. Whoever would? Then sensing he had a good point, he pumped it further with the repeated question, with increasing fervor... "Is there anyone who has ever met a perfect man?" Silence, for a time (good work Preacher Tom), but then, sheepishly,

a small well worn man stood up in the very last pew. The preacher was shocked that someone would dare to try to borrow on his ministerial thunder. He shouted back to the man, "Do you mean to tell me that you feel you are a perfect man?" "Well, no," the poor fellow replied, "It's not me. I'm standing up in honor of my wife's first husband!" Touché.

There is no perfect husband; that is for sure, but it is not a laughing matter. Deep down, no one knows better than he, how far short he falls. But (Are you listening?) he also knows how hard he tries. For the most part the American man and husband is honest, God fearing, concerned for his family and friends, for his country and for the goodness 'round the world. Almost without fail he steadies the course.

He is tough, tough enough to have won two major wars and several minor ones. He survived depressions, great and small and in-between. He has built the greatest nation ever seen on earth. If there is any feeling more universal in the world than the criticism of his ways and wiles, it is the universal aim to copy him and what he does.

He sometimes does not know how to show it, but he is kind and tender-hearted. The gruff outward actions are a fraud. I watch him cry. Man the human being. Man the husband. Man the neighbor. Man the father. Man the friend. Man the son. Man the wanderer. Man the worker. Man the hunter. Man the hunted. Man the troubled. Man the boss, who has to make the payroll every month. Man the lonely. Man-in-need. God-fearing, people-loving, poor old manipulated man.

We see him depicted as marching on with the rising sun, or riding off into the western sunset; caring more about his horse, or his car, or his boat, or his Team, or his job, or his money, or his ego, than he does about his friends, his children or his wife. I am here to tell you that it is not so.

I know this man, and he knows me. I know him from the inside. I see him from the outside, and the broad side and the short side, from the long side and from the tall side and the thin side, the bear side and the bull side.

This is a sermon in defense of the American male. Poor old fellow. A recent best-selling book tells of how he fails to open up. He is often maligned, often taken for granted, even pitied at times, what with the predictable passages, times and the seasons of his life. Man the married. Man the harried. Man the worried. Man the hounded. Man the husband. The feminists have his number. The children have his checkbook. His boss has all the power. His wife knows all his weaknesses. Critics speak as if most all the problems of the world come as result of his conniving, self-serving, self-propelling ways. White American male: Captain of the Good Ship Lollypop! As if all he had to do was stroll down easy street day by endless day. Not so...

In recent years and months he has been widely pilloried for the problems of our economy. They say his lust for power and money propelled our stock markets and economy to insanely inflated heights and then, they say, his shortcuts, maneuvering and even down right dishonest deeds, brought it rudely back down to earth. No so. Not with the most of men.

He really is not all that bad, my friends, not the American man I know. While he seldom measures up to what he longs to be, he is usually trying with all his might. Oh sure, he has his faults. But then, he cannot be everything. All things cast a shadow. The larger is the strength, the longer is the shadow. Do you understand? One man cannot be everything to everyone. Long distance runners cannot put the shot. Michael Jordan could not play baseball very well. Race horses cannot pull a plow. Leaders do not follow well. Nervous people cannot always think of what to do or say in time, but if you watch them, they usually spot the trouble

first. Timid men can be tremendous lovers. Dreamers are not good when it comes to patching up the dyke. Bold executives seldom take the time to be sure everyone agrees; they are too busy casting forward! Brokers are seldom good at long-range planning. They are trained to move fast when the wind blows. Generals give orders, especially in battle. Captains rule their ships, especially in a storm. The man who is usually right, usually has trouble when he is wrong. If you love life the more, you handle adversity the less. Good providers usually are not the most patient people you can find. All things cast a shadow! Even goodness does.

Stay with me...This really is a sermon: This man I am speaking of did not choose to live the life he's living. He just kept moving on, day in, day out, doing what he was supposed to do, and often not too happy about it: worrying, hurrying, trying to keep up, trying to please somebody else. Oh sure, maybe he chose to be a lawyer, or a plumber, or a salesman, or a preacher, or an engineer; but he did not choose the life which now accompanies his daily round and regimen. He just responded, like everybody else. No one ever told him what it would be like to catch the tiger by the tail, or to ride the make-believe horses on the sundry not so merry-go-rounds of the decades he will travel before his life on earth is through.

He just got on; took the job which was available when he graduated school or college; if called he went off to serve his nation in the army; he did his best with the vision he had then. He learned to drink a few; then kept going as best he could, and before you know it, he turned fifty-two. It took him by surprise. Maybe that is the meaning of the trek outside the Gates of Eden. The author of the Bible knew it, too. "There just must be more than this", he said, "There must be more than this."

Little wonder that he is afraid. The opposite of love is not hate, it's fear. "I'm hanging on", one man told me one day, "just hanging on, waiting for some final act and movement. When do they tell me why I'm here, or what the battle really is?" It's not so much that he clutches at straws as that he knows he is just a standing domino. Cyril Connolly says in The Unquiet Grave, "Two fears alternate in man: one of loneliness and the other one of bondage." In his isolation he is vulnerable. "You cannot give, all the time", he told me, when I asked him why he did it, "I needed something back for me" he said, "someone to know that I, too, was/am in need of love."

If a woman's role is complicated by the demands on her, of newness and the nuances of this present time, so, you see, is man's. If her mother had it easier, even in her bondage, so was his father's role the clearer, too. At least dear old Dad was allowed to be a man.

This modern man I am speaking of was taught to provide, and to take care of people. He was supposed to be a macho man! Hard work would be the answer to his problem (And the funny thing it was). He was to protect his wife, then his children, then save something for his parents, be true to his family, help his neighbors, support his church and synagogue, round and round the racetrack goes.

As a young boy, he was taught to value his self-worth in terms of his achievements. When he did well and won, he was praised as heaven's finest child. When he lost, he was consoled with the faintest praise of all: "Don't worry, Sonny, it's not so bad to lose, it's how you played the game – but listen, you'll win it all next time won't you? Just like a good son should." Eee gads! (as Dr. Goldberg writes in "The Hazards of Being Male.") "Soon the outer voice was internalized, and the search for praise and the proof of his worthiness was on. "No one ever

told him what would happen next, but he failed to learn to accept himself. Achievement was his goal and God's."

Soon enough he began to feel good about himself when he won, and rotten when he didn't. His moods would swing incessantly, in proportion to the scorecard. His friends were those who helped his team. And while he became grown-up and growing old, there is still a little boy inside waiting, wanting to be loved. He's usually looking for approval. He seems so competent and capable. Bosh! He is not tough or angry, he's...afraid. He is fearful someone will discover he is not a perfect man. Isn't it a pity how few friends successful people really have? He often has nobody. "I wish I could find my husband one good friend", one woman said, "he has no one he can talk to." Not even her...

As to this image bit, I add with reference, the Bible is not all that helpful. It speaks of the Order of Creation. It keeps telling man he is number one, the leader of the band, the Head man of his home. He heard it, read it, liked it. Head of the House. But the Bible has been misquoted, or misinterpreted anyway. He's not supposed to be the Head Honcho. The way Jesus said it "The greatest must be the servant of all."

Cadillac cars used to have a TV ad which ended with a question "Isn't it time that you did something for yourself?" "It is." And a splendid Caddy rolled on by. But watch it. For the pity is, it often comes too late – not the Cadillac - that often comes too early, but the rest of it. The things he wants to do for him, they often comes too late. Oh, my how the mighty fall! That is what a mid-life crisis means. He is tired of measuring up to somebody else's expectations. He does not feel appreciated. He feels cheated. About the time he is ready to spend some time with his children, they have no time for him. Just when he comes to realize that so much is

gone, and he determines to do something to salvage it, someone tells him he has cancer or the heart attack is serious or his legs or his brain won't work well anymore.

It started to catch up, somewhere south of forty-eight, and he now is spending most of his time trying to hold the prizes which he won, needing more and more and more, to prove that he is good (I actually saw his trophy case. It took four hours a month just to polish it all up again and again and the newest one in the whole huge case, was twenty-two years old.)

Meanwhile, his boss discovers his ennui. His wife is pressuring him to open up. Silence rules the quiet moments, and harsh voices rule the rest. He gets busy doing everything, or anything or even nothing. He does not communicate, partly because he is exhausted, and partly because if he did tell her what he was thinking, she could not bear to listen. He is lonely, just as she is, so little wonder it often comes tumbling down – burnt out with half a life to live. Or they retire him early, and take his job away.

His children rise and leave him. They are supposed to. But, they used to wait around to see how they could be useful on the family farm, or in the family trade, or even in the family tree. He does not want to dominate them (honestly he doesn't) he simply wants respect, perhaps he only needs a friend.

Sure, there were times when he should have opened up his heart, as well as his pocketbook. Sure, he should have yelled less and listened more. We judge so easily, when the Bible says, "Judge not". Don't be too hard on the man. "I knew that I was wrong", he said, "but my other choice was to kill myself."

Funny thing, this mortal life of ours – how tantalizing it can be, especially if you set out to find perfection, especially if you try to please everybody all the time. Funny thing, you'll find the Funny Farm awaiting before the journey is through, and that is not so funny.

Are you listening? Man, husband, you are allowed to be a human being. There are no perfect creatures here, outside the gates of Eden. You do not need to win God's favor. You cannot become the favorite son of God, Jesus Christ already is. That post is gone. And anyway after him, you already are the favorite son of God.

Well, then, as we hurry home, a few of you are asking, if perfect is not what we should try to be, why did Jesus command us to be perfect in the Scriptures? One of the most difficult and terrifying verses in the Bible, Matthew 5:48. "You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect." I want to say, "Hey Lord, just wait a minute. You cannot possibly mean that. It is so impossible this way, and I shall never achieve anything but a guilt trip through it all."

But I grew older and learned more. The Greek word for perfect does not mean perfection, not as we use it. A man in the ancient world, who had achieved his purpose, was said to be perfect. Perfect – not spotless, just one who did his part. An essay which caught the gist of what was going on would be a "perfect paper". It is a functional word, Professor Barclay writes, "When a person or thing realizes its purpose, or finds the object of the designer." i.e., you can be perfectly imperfect, too. Telos means "an end, a purpose, a goal, an aim." You must find the perfect life, i.e., to try to fulfill the purpose God had in mind for you when He gave you life.

Five steps will take you there.

I. The first step is an order: Quit trying to be perfect! You cannot win God's favor or Salvation. Those are gifts of God. You cannot make another love you, far less the Lord. Love is a gift; just say "Thank you." You don't have to show the world. You don't have to prove a

thing. Your worthiness to be a child of God is not in question. Relax. Be part of the process of being human. You are fragile and you know it; so does Jesus Christ. It has been revealed in a myriad of ways already. And, as you grow older, it will be parceled out to you ever more clearly. You do not need to beat the air and run a thousand races. Pummel yourself enough to be presentable, but get on with it. You are allowed to be a human being.

II. Second, a suggestion: surrender it to Christ. You cannot make it through this life alone, and alone you truly are, until you learn to trust His promise and bask in the reflected glory of His perfect Son. Because Jesus Christ is perfect, you do not need to be. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, committing or omitting, the mountainous list of things we should and should not do. But God loves you anyway, just as you are. Anyway, a perfect child can be oh so awfully boring.

III. Third, a plea: Allow someone to love you. If you love yourself, forgive yourself, then others can forgive and love you, too. The answer, as always, is within you; if you allow yourself the liberty of being human, not a shiny new automation who is conditioned to respond to the command "Well done. Good boy. Well done." Successful men have trouble loving, and being loved. They are big shots at the office, but they are just ordinary fellows down at home. The answer is within you: stop awhile and listen to the breezes of your beautiful and lovely soul and psyche. Learn to share the joy of what you find with someone else who's special. She, he, wants you to, and is also waiting.

IV. Fourth, a tip: Choose the life you want and need. There is so little time. We have such a little time to go together. You must be true to

you. No one else really cares what you are and do, not as much as you do. If they don't like it, or don't like you, those are, as we used to say up home, "tough apples."

V. Fifth and last, a prevailing thought: when you have been honest with yourself; when you have surrendered all your faults, and foibles, fears, and failures to Jesus Christ your Lord and Friend; when you have reached out to allow someone else to touch your heart without fear and tenderness, man, listen: then, but only then, can you live the abundant life Christ promises.

Share the news. Let them know that you have learned to love your crooked neighbor will all your crooked heart! That should make you laugh. An honest inventory found and shared will lead you on to glory. You can love the self itself and serve the higher purpose for which the self, and you, were made. And what is more, you will be a man, my son, created in the image of the One who made and rules it all. You are not perfect, but when and where it counts, you do not have to be. Someone else who loves you has already won the prize, but He will gladly share it with you, if you but ask. It looks easy... and in the time and providence of God, it really is. For now and evermore, Amen.

March 9, 2003

© Copyright, Dr. Richard M. Cromie
Palm Beach, Florida