

How blest are the poor in spirit!

The path to holiness is not an easy one, but Jesus offers comfort on the way and the hope of ultimate blessedness.

BACKGROUND

The beatitudes are part of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus preached to the crowds that followed him. By setting the scene on a mountain top, Matthew subtly compares Jesus with Moses who, on Mount Sinai, had become the lawgiver. On this mountain Jesus brings a new revelation to God's people.

The beatitudes provide a road map for finding your way in the kingdom of heaven. They are not, however, a guidebook to happiness, as we understand that word, because those who live humbly and meekly invariably invite insult, abuse and even death.

Unlike the beatitudes found in Luke's gospel, Matthew's beatitudes don't include corresponding curses. Luke says: "Blessed are you who are poor," but "woe to you who are rich." Matthew says, "How blest are the poor in spirit." According to Matthew, being deprived

is not enough for blessedness. What's necessary is the awareness that on our own we are nothing; in spirit, we must all be paupers who rely totally on God.

Although the beatitudes don't promise to boost our popularity or invite us to join the club, they do guarantee future glory. The first half of each beatitude describes the trials of our present lives, but the second half looks forward to a time of reward.

Notice, too, how the first four beatitudes differ from the rest. The poor in spirit, the sorrowing and the lowly are those involved in contemplation and the "inner life," while the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers are those who put their faith in action through works of love. Passive contemplation and active service are both good and necessary routes to holiness.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

Some people find in the beatitudes a description of Jesus' own personality. His truly was a life of humility, mercy, poverty of spirit, purity of heart, hunger for justice, peacemaking, and suffering for the sake of righteousness. Living these beatitudes led Jesus to his death and burial, but also to glory.

As Christians, we are called to imitate Jesus by living the beatitudes in our lives. As married Christians, you will have a special vocation: to follow Jesus not just as individuals but as a couple. God has gifted you with a partner so that together you might find your way to the kingdom. Each of you has a special role to play in the working out of the other's salvation.

The fact is that married people grow in holiness primarily through their relationships with their spouses and children. The challenges you will encounter in

your relationship will be God's chief means of calling you to holiness and of making you holy.

The reality is that you can't grow in love, compassion and understanding unless you have the opportunities to exercise those virtues. And you can't exercise them if you don't face situations in which it is difficult to be patient, loving and understanding. The best relationships are not those in which nothing goes wrong but those that survive (and build on) the things that go wrong.

Choosing this reading can announce your willingness to endure the pain that the inevitable stresses of your relationship will place on you, so that together you can grow to be more like Christ, so that together you can grow in blessedness.

The reading from the holy *gospel* according to *Matthew* ...

Take time to set the scene. Let the verbs tell the story: “went,” “sat,” “gathered,” “began to teach.”

When Jesus saw the *crowds* •
 he *went* up to the *mountainside*. ••
 After he had *sat* down •
 his disciples *gathered* around him, •
 and he began to *teach* them: ••

Make eye contact. Pause between the first and second phrase of each beatitude.

“How *blest* are the *poor* in *spirit*: •
 the *reign* of *God* is theirs. ••
 Blest *too* are the *sorrowing*; •
 they shall be *consoled*. ••
 [Blest are the *lowly*; •
 they shall *inherit* the *land*.] •••

Your goal is to challenge, comfort, instruct, share joy.

“*Blest* are they who *hunger* and *thirst* for *holiness*; •
 they shall have their *fill*. ••
 Blest are they who show *mercy*; •
 mercy shall be *theirs*. ••
 Blest are the *single-hearted* •
 for they shall *see God*. •••

“Sons and daughters” is more inclusive than “sons.”

“Blest too • the *peacemakers*; •
 they shall be called • *sons* of *God*. ••
 Blest are those *persecuted* for *holiness*’ sake; •
 the *reign* of *God* is theirs. •••
 Blest are *you* • when they *insult* you • and *persecute* you •
 and utter every kind of *slander* against you •
 because of *me*. ••
 Be *glad* and *rejoice*, •
 for your *reward* in *heaven* is *great*.” •••

Slow pace of the final words.

The *gospel* of the Lord. •••

You are the light of the world.

To be of value, those who follow Jesus must not hide their light nor lose their flavor.

BACKGROUND

This passage from Matthew continues the magnificent Sermon on the Mount whose dominant theme is the same as that of the entire gospel—the coming of the kingdom of God. In this text Jesus is describing what life in the kingdom looks like.

The teaching contained in the Sermon on the Mount is demanding. It contains some of Jesus' most familiar and most challenging instructions: Don't lust even in your thoughts; do not divorce; love your enemy; turn the other cheek; don't worry about the material needs of life; do to others what you would have them do to you. Some people think this is an unrealistic standard of behavior that no one could ever achieve. No doubt the standard is high, but Christian tradition has always found here something possible. Read chapters five through seven of Matthew's gospel and see how realistic you think Jesus' expectations are.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

The *Revised New American Bible* labels this section of the Sermon on the Mount “the similes of salt and light.” But these are not similes; they are metaphors. A simile says one thing *is like* another, but a metaphor says it *is* the other thing. Why does this matter? Jesus says his disciples *are* salt and light. Jesus teaches them how to reveal what they are: by doing good works. If they do that, their light will shine.

The sacrament of marriage also is not a simile but a metaphor. Marriage does not help you become *like* a sacrament of God's love, it *makes* you a sacrament of God's love. That's a given, a starting point, not a goal. You will spend your lives learning to be better sacraments, but already, even as you begin, you reveal God's love.

However, despite our best intentions, any relationship can go flat. Jesus reminds us that to keep its

The metaphors used in this passage compare disciples to salt and light. Technically speaking, there is no way salt can “lose its flavor” and still be salt. But the point is, of what use is salt that has no taste? Salt both flavors and preserves. Jesus is suggesting that disciples must do the same. If they don't, they are no use to the kingdom.

The same message comes from the image of light. In the typical one-room home of first-century Palestine, a single lamp could light the whole house. Disciples must also give out “light,” not just for themselves but for others as well.

While Jesus calls disciples to do “good deeds,” he does not tell them to take the credit. It's God's grace that enables them to do what's right, so it's God who gets the glory: “Give praise to your heavenly Father.”

“flavor” every relationship requires work. Many marriages have failed, not because they weren't meant to be but because someone stopped trying.

Jesus also says, “A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” In other words, “It stands out like a sore thumb.” Is it too blunt to suggest that you are to do the same; that is, to stand out by your love for one another so much that people can't help but be reminded of God's love?

This reading can express your commitment to letting your light shine through the witness of your marriage, because marriage is the special opportunity you've been given to be light for the world, and it is the best place for you to do good deeds that will bring glory to God. This reading can also remind those who come to give witness and to pray with you on your wedding day that their lives can be “sore thumbs,” too.

A reading from the holy *gospel* according to *Matthew* •••

Affirm us, then pause.

Jesus said to his *disciples*: ••
“*You* are the *salt* of the *earth*. •••
But what if salt goes *flat*? ••
How can you *restore* its flavor? ••
Then it is good for *nothing* but to be *thrown* out •
and *trampled* underfoot. •••

*He already knows that you can't.
What's the emotion here?*

Affirm and pause.

“*You* are the *light* of the *world*. ••
A *city* set on a *hill* • cannot be *hidden*. ••
Men do not *light* a *lamp* •
and then put it under a *bushel* *basket*. ••
They set it on a *stand* •
where it gives light to *all* in the house. •••

*“People” would be more inclusive
than “men.”*

Tone is relaxed and conversational.

“*In the same* way, •
your light must *shine* before men •
so that they may see *goodness* in your acts •
and give *praise* to your heavenly *Father*.” •••

Persuade us that this is possible.

The *gospel* of the Lord. •••

Let no one separate what God has joined.

God created humans male and female so they could become one flesh.

BACKGROUND

In Jesus' day, Jewish law permitted divorce, but opinions varied regarding what constituted legitimate grounds. One school of thought, that of the rabbi Shammai, insisted that adultery was the only justification, while another, that of the rabbi Hillel, said that falling in love with someone else or even disliking your wife's cooking was reason enough to end a marriage.

When confronted with a question about whether there is "any reason whatever" for which a man can divorce his wife, Jesus responds with a clear "no." That,

in effect, says "no" not just to the two schools of rabbinic thought, but to the whole argument. In fact, Jesus seems to be saying that there's something wrong with the question itself.

The will of God, Jesus says, is found in the text from Genesis—which he quotes—that makes it clear that marriage is a divine invention, not a human one. The union of man and woman expresses God's purpose in creating human beings.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

This gospel reading at weddings can sound like a warning: Since there isn't "any reason whatever" for divorce, you'd better be serious about what you're doing because you won't be able to undo it later.

The focus of this reading seems to fall on the question of divorce. But the message is actually other than that: Marriage is a holy and permanent relationship between man and woman, because in a mysterious way, by marrying, two become one flesh.

The selection from Mark's gospel, Mark 10:6–9 (on page 109), includes Jesus' reference to the Creator's

plan "in the beginning" but doesn't include the discussion of divorce. It may be wiser to use the passage from Mark instead of this passage from Matthew; a wedding liturgy is probably not the place for a gospel and homily about divorce.

Whether you use Matthew's version or Mark's, the message remains the same: Jesus uses a confrontation to assert a beautiful teaching—the marriage union is a work of God established at the creation and, therefore, something that no human hand can dissolve.

A reading from the holy *gospel* according to *Matthew* •••

For a smoother sentence, say,
“Some Pharisees came up to Jesus
to test him, and said. . . .”

Some *Pharisees* came up to Jesus and said, • to *test* him, ••
“May a man *divorce* his wife • for any reason *whatever*?” ••

What’s Jesus’ tone: scolding,
teaching or both?

He replied, ••
“Have you not *read* • that at the *beginning* •
the Creator made them *male* and *female* •
and declared, ••

Quotes Genesis 2:24.

‘For *this reason* •
a man shall *leave* his father and mother •
and *cling* to his *wife*, •
and the *two* shall become as *one*?’ ••
Thus they are no longer *two* • but *one* flesh. •••

“No one” is more inclusive than
“no man.” Gradually slow pace
with final words.

“Therefore, • let no man *separate* •
what *God* has *joined*.” •••

The *gospel* of the Lord. •••

There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee.

Jesus multiplies the joy of the bride and groom and all the guests by turning water to wine.

BACKGROUND

John is a type of storyteller unlike any of the other gospel writers. John layers the stories with levels of meaning, making them rich, complex narratives that accomplish several goals at once.

This story is a perfect example. On one level it is a folksy tale of a small town wedding where the wine unexpectedly runs out. It gives a rare and brief glimpse of Jesus' relationship with his mother, and it speaks of an amazing miracle worked by Jesus—his first.

But the story is richer than that! Beneath the surface there are many layers of meaning. For just one example, the story's stone water jars ordinarily contained water to be used for ceremonial washing. Because the jars are empty, Jesus orders that they be filled, and immediately the water is changed into superabundant wine. What could this mean? Isaiah (25:6–8) tells us

that God will one day spread a feast for all peoples, “of juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines.” On that day God “will destroy death forever.” Perhaps we have here in the gospel a sign of the beginning of this great feast on the day of resurrection.

So what is this story about? It's about a wedding, and about the coming of God's glory and about the beginning of eternal life. John says this was the first of Jesus' “signs” (which is John's term for the marvelous works of Jesus). This miracle manifests Jesus' power to transform not just things, but human lives.

That is what a wedding is all about. It, too, is a miraculous sign of Jesus' power. We have a gathering of people; we have a joyful taste of God's glory. The ordinary becomes extraordinary, lives are transformed, and we receive a glimpse into the life that will last for ever.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

When your grandparents were married, this gospel was the one read at all wedding liturgies. Why was this reading used? True, the events occur at a wedding. But the bride and groom get almost no attention. The focus of the text is not on their love nor on the challenges they might face in marriage. No, the spotlight here is on Jesus.

Perhaps the bride and groom are overshadowed for a reason. John's gospel after all, speaks of Jesus as the bridegroom and John the Baptist as the best man; see John 3:25–30. Jesus has come to wed his bride—all of us who believe in him. In line with custom, he is even the one who provides wine for the feast.

This reading about the wedding at Cana is one of the three wonders we celebrate at Epiphany (along with the adoration of the magi and the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River). So if your wedding takes

place at Christmastime, here may be the perfect reading.

Perhaps the homilist will find an opportunity here to reflect on how weddings speak to us of new life and transformation: As they begin their new life together, the bride and groom are no longer two, but one. The care and concern friends and neighbors show for one another at weddings, which is mirrored in Mary's concern about the lack of wine, might prompt the homilist to discuss what the life of the followers of Jesus can look like.

This gospel, the only one of the gospel options that is a story, presents a groom who failed to provide enough wine for the guests. That flub became an opportunity for Jesus to save the day. Our own failures and inadequacies, in Christ, can become openings into glory.

A reading from the holy *gospel* according to *John* ...

Stress the presence of the mother of Jesus.

There was a *wedding* • at *Cana* in Galilee, •
and the *mother* of *Jesus* was there. ••
Jesus and his disciples •
had *likewise* been invited to the celebration. •••

Hushed, as if Mary were whispering, but without really whispering.

At a certain point • the *wine* ran out, •
and Jesus' *mother* told him, ••
“They have *no more wine*.” ••
Jesus replied, ••
“Woman, • how does this *concern* of yours involve *me*? ••
My *hour* has not yet *come*.” •••

“Hour” is an allusion to Jesus' death and resurrection.

His mother *instructed* those waiting on table, •
“Do whatever he *tells* you.” •••

Stress function, number and size of jars.

As prescribed for Jewish ceremonial *washings*, •
there were at hand • *six* stone *water jars*, •
each one holding fifteen to *twenty-five* gallons. •••

Jesus knows they'll be surprised.

“*Fill* those jars with *water*,” • Jesus ordered, •
at which they filled them to the *brim*. ••
“*Now*,” • he said, • “*draw* some out •
and take it to the *waiter* in *charge*.” ••
They *did* as he instructed them. •••

The waiter in charge *tasted* the water made *wine*, •
without *knowing* where it had *come* from; ••

Love one another as I have loved you.

To be Jesus' disciples, to make our joy complete, we must love one another. This is Jesus' commandment.

BACKGROUND

The gospel of John differs from the other three gospels in several significant ways. One of them is the presence in John of lengthy speeches, given by Jesus at the Last Supper, in which he tries to comfort and reassure his disciples.

In these “farewell discourses” (from which this passage is taken), Jesus tells his disciples of his impending departure, but he assures them he will return after “a little while.” He promises the coming of “another advocate,” that is, the Holy Spirit who will teach the disciples everything and remind them of all Jesus taught them. Lastly, Jesus imparts peace to the disciples and reminds them of his love.

In a tone that’s sincere and intimate, and with language that’s poignant and poetic, Jesus prepares his friends for tough times ahead and bids them farewell.

Throughout the gospel, John focuses the reader on the special relationship that exists between Jesus as “Son” and God as “Father.” The gospel also calls the reader to faith in Jesus’ identity: Jesus is equal to God because he and the Father are one. “He who sees me has seen the Father,” Jesus asserts. That kind of assertion demands a response: Those who refuse to believe it live in darkness, but those who believe live in the light of faith and, therefore, must love one another as Jesus has loved them.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

When a relationship falters—when hurts pile up and the going is tough and strictly uphill, we might think we need to withdraw to the factory of our hearts and there manufacture more love with which to put the relationship back on track. But we are not the source of love. It doesn’t originate in us; it only flows through us. God is love’s source.

In this passage Jesus claims that the love he shares with his disciples is the love he first received from the Father. That love is the very foundation of Christ’s relationship with his friends. It is a living, growing, life-giving force that begins in God. The love that originated in the Father and passed through Jesus to his disciples is radiated out into the world by the disciples’ love for one another. Love begets love, sustains the lovers and makes them one with each other.

It’s important for everyone beginning a lifelong relationship with another human being to remember that the only love they can give away is the love they’ve

first received. Even the love we feel for the one we’re going to marry originates in God, not in us. If we were not loved first by God, we would be incapable of loving. We can’t expect to find love’s source within ourselves. If we think we can, we will look within, when trouble comes, and fail to find the love we need.

Jesus commands the disciples to love one another as he has loved them. While challenging them to love, he reminds them they are loved. Knowing they are loved helps them love. When the tensions and struggles of marriage make loving difficult, the Christian husband and wife find strength not in their own ability to generate love, but in God’s limitless love for them.

Knowing that God loves us in our weakness and with our flaws helps us love others despite their flaws. If this gospel convinces you of that, if it can remind you throughout your marriage that the source of love in your marriage is God’s own love for you, then you would choose wisely to select this text.

A short reading means a slow reading.

A reading from the holy *gospel* according to *John* •••

Make eye contact.

Jesus said to his disciples: ••

Stress the contrasts, “Father”/“me” and “I”/“you.”

“As the *Father* has loved *me*, •
so *I* have loved *you*. ••
Live on in my love. ••

The challenge.

“You will *live* in my love •
if you *keep* my *commandments*, •
even as *I* have kept my *Father’s* commandments, •
and live in *his* love. •••

The challenge leads to joy.

“All this I *tell* you •
that *my* joy may be *yours* •
and *your* joy may be *complete*. •••

Slow your pace on the final words.

“*This* is my commandment: ••
love *one another* •
as *I* have loved *you*.” •••

The *gospel* of the Lord. •••

There is no greater love than this.

When we lay down our lives for love, we truly begin to live.

BACKGROUND

“I no longer speak of you as slaves,” says Jesus. “Instead, I call you friends.” That may seem like a puzzling statement. It’s great that Jesus now calls his disciples friends, one might think, but why did he ever call them slaves?

In biblical times it was not necessarily degrading to be known as the slave of a good master. There was no distinction between “slave” and “servant.” To be a slave meant to be taken into a household to serve its free-born members. Even highly honored royal officials were known by the title Slave of the Lord.

Earlier, Jesus had said, “No slave is greater than his master.” This was not meant to belittle them; Jesus was simply saying that as he, their master, had washed their feet, now they should wash each other’s feet.

But while being designated the slave or servant of the Lord did not demean a person’s dignity, slaves were

not normally a part of a master’s inner circle: They were not usually the ones most trusted. Their role was to listen and obey.

Moses, Joshua and King David were all called “slaves of God” (usually translated as “servant”); Abraham alone was called a “friend of God.” Here Jesus gives the disciples a title that scripture had reserved for just one person. By doing so he names a new and deeper relationship between himself and his disciples. The implication is that the blind obedience of a slave is not what’s expected of a Christian disciple.

A follower of Jesus, like a true friend, obeys out of love. Even more, a friend can make bold to ask another friend for what he or she needs. Jesus suggests that his disciples pray with confidence whenever they ask the Father for anything.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

Jesus names his followers “friends.” That’s a different model of the church than the highly structured institution that evolved in the centuries following Jesus’ death and resurrection. What might the church be like today if people thought of it not as shepherds-and-sheep but as a community of friends?

We can ask the same question of marriage: What can a marriage be like if each spouse thinks of the other as a friend? Of course, many couples do think of each other that way, and their marriages reflect this.

It is from Jesus that we learn the meaning of friendship: “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Jesus not only taught that truth, he also lived by it freely giving up his own life for others. He could offer no better example than that.

Marriage provides one of life’s best opportunities to follow Jesus’ example of laying down one’s life for another. In a loving marriage, we “die” to ourselves for

the sake of another on a daily basis. None of this is self-hatred; it is the giving up of selfishness.

In this passage Jesus asserts that he will know his “friends” by the fruit they bear in their lives. As a couple, one of your major goals and chief joys will be doing just that: bearing fruit. Yes, that may mean children. Your marriage will also be fruitful if you bear peace, love, compassion, understanding, joy, and the multitude of other virtues that the interaction of marriage will enable (and require) you to develop.

“It was not you who chose me,” says Jesus, “it was I who chose you.” It would not be inappropriate to consider how that divine initiative is at work even in your relationship with your future spouse. In what way is God a part of your choosing one another? Was that choice entirely your doing or has God somehow drawn you to each other?

A reading from the holy *gospel* according to *John* ...

Jesus said to his disciples: ••

“*This is my commandment*: ••

love one another •

as *I* have loved you. •••

There is no *greater* love than *this*: ••

to lay down one’s *life* • for one’s *friends*. •••

“*You* are my friends •

if you *do* what I *command* you. ••

“I no longer speak of you as *slaves*, •

for a slave does not *know* what his master is *about*. ••

Instead, • I call you *friends*, •

since I have made *known* to you •

all that I heard from my *Father*. •••

“It was not *you* who chose *me*, ••

it was *I* who chose *you* •

to go forth • and *bear fruit*. ••

Your fruit must *endure*, •

so that *all* you ask the Father • in *my name* •

he will *give* you.” •••

The *gospel* of the Lord. •••

Begin with a challenge.

Slowly, aware of what you’re asking—selfless sacrifice.

Contrast “slaves” and “friends.” You can suggest what “friends” implies by softening tone and adding intensity.

Stress Jesus’ initiative.

Another challenge.

Bearing fruit means you can pray with confidence.

I pray that they may be one.

Jesus prays for his disciples, present and future, that we may be one as he and God are one, that our unity may be complete.

BACKGROUND

Here John presents Jesus' final moments with his friends before Jesus' arrest and passion. John's gospel portrays a man on the road to death who thinks not of himself but of the needs of those he will leave behind. Jesus' words are a prayer, and the prayer is a lyric and spontaneous expression of his deepest feelings.

Jesus prays not only for the friends in the room with him, but also for all those who will follow them as future disciples. What Jesus asks from all those who will place their faith in him is unity. He prays that the

unity of Christians will reveal to the world the unity that exists between God and himself.

Jesus wants Christians to experience the same oneness with him that he experiences with God. By heeding his command to love one another, Christians find unity and continue Jesus' work of revealing God to the world.

When we are one with Jesus, he lives in us; and by living in us, he lives in the world.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

Jesus doesn't ask the disciples to form an organization. He doesn't tell them to schedule periodic meetings to discuss differences; nor does he instruct them to band together in a reform movement. No. What challenges and changes the world will not be such an organization; it will be the gospel's message about the relationship between God and Jesus.

When, through their love for one another, Christians live in unity, they will embody the unique relationship Jesus had with God, and only then will the world understand who Jesus is. That's what makes the church important—we become the visible embodiment, the incarnation, of the love between Jesus and the Father.

Like Christian unity, Christian marriage also confronts the world with the reality of Jesus. The unity of woman and man can be a mirror of the love and life Jesus shares with God. But the marriage union is no more humanly achievable than the unity of Christians. Only God can make it possible. Only God can enable two to become one as Jesus and the Father are one.

Part of the privilege and responsibility of Christian marriage is that two people, through their intimate love for one another, reveal God to the world. Choosing this gospel reading can be a way of committing yourselves to living out your marriage in a way that gives witness to the life and love of God and Jesus.

A reading from the holy gospel according to John ...

You might focus eyes over heads of the assembly.

Jesus looked up to heaven and prayed: ••
 “Holy Father, ••
 I do not pray for my disciples *alone*. ••
 I pray *also* for those who will *believe* in me
 through their *word*, • that *all* may be *one* •
 as *you*, Father, • are in *me*, • and *I* in *you*; ••
 I pray that they may be [*one*] in *us*, •
 that the world may *believe* that you sent me. •••

Jesus’ love for them echoes in these lines.

“I have given *them* • the glory you gave *me* •
 that *they* may be one, • as *we* are one— ••
I living in *them*, • *you* living in *me*— ••
 that their *unity* • may be *complete*. •••
 So shall the world *know* that you sent me, •
 and that you *loved* them • as you loved *me*. •••

Renew intensity with each recurrence of “Father.”
 Jesus longs for believers to be with him in heaven.

“Father, • all those you *gave* me •
 I would have in my *company* where I *am*, •
 to *see* this glory of mine which is your *gift* to me, •
 because of the *love* you bore me •
 before the world *began*. ••

Stress Jesus’ intimacy with the Father. Renew intensity.

“*Just* Father, ••
 the *world* has *not* known you, •
 but *I* have known you; ••
 and *these* men have known that you *sent* me. ••
 To them I have *revealed* your name, •
 and I will *continue* to reveal it •
 so that your *love* for me may *live* in them, •
 and *I* may live in them.” •••

By sending the Holy Spirit.

Slow pace on final words.
 Substantial pause before announcing “The gospel of the Lord.”

The gospel of the Lord. •••

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

The whole of the law is based on two commandments: Love God; love your neighbor.

BACKGROUND

Most Christians are used to thinking that keeping the commandments means following ten basic rules of behavior. But devout Jews of Jesus' day (and of ours as well) believed that all the commandments of the law (613 of them) were to be observed. With so many to keep track of, it was natural for people to want to know which were the "heavy," or more serious, and which the "light," or less significant commandments. In addition, rabbis were often asked to provide a brief summary of the law in order to give a sense of what was truly essential.

The first part of Jesus' answer would not have surprised any of his listeners. It is part of the "*Sh'ma*," the Jewish confession of faith in one God taken from the sixth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, and no rabbi would quarrel with that response.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

There's nothing here about man and woman or husband and wife. So why would this make a good wedding reading? Since you probably have been thinking seriously about your marriage for a long time, you've probably realized that marriage is about much more than romance, about more than uncontrollable feelings for and a strong attraction to another person.

Those good feelings may be present, certainly, but marriage has to do with more than how we're feeling or who we're attracted to. It is a vocation through which and in which each partner has an opportunity to work out his or her salvation.

But that Jesus would place the "lighter" command to love one's neighbor, also a familiar scripture verse (Leviticus 19:18), on the same level as the "heavier" law that commanded love of God was remarkable indeed.

This is a fairly common method in Jewish teaching. You surprise the hearers, maybe even leave them befuddled, so they go home and mull over what you said and then try to figure out what you meant.

Jesus meant that one law cannot exist without the other. Perhaps he meant that without the love of neighbor, love of God cannot become much more than empty affection, and without the love of God, love of neighbor can become near-sighted narcissism.

Marriage is one way of being a follower of Christ in the world. It presents unique challenges and unique opportunities for Christian growth: It is in the sometimes hard and painful, sometimes sweet and joyful moments couples share that they encounter God and hear God's call to grow in holiness.

So this passage has everything to do with marriage. As a way of being in the world, marriage provides a couple with the best opportunities they'll have to love God and neighbor. As they come to know each other, a couple grows in knowledge of God; as they grow in their love of God, they grow in their love of one another.

A reading from the holy *gospel* according to *Matthew* ...

What matters is what the lawyer is asking, not why.

One of the *Pharisees*, • a *lawyer*, •
in an attempt to *trip up* Jesus, •
asked him, ••
“Teacher, •
which commandment of the law is the *greatest*?” •••

Slowly. Jesus teaches as well as answers.

“Heart” means “will”; “soul” means “life”; “mind” is another way of saying “heart.”

Jesus said to him: ••
“You shall *love* the *Lord* your *God* •
with your whole *heart*, •
with your whole *soul*, •
and with *all* your *mind*.” ••
This is the *greatest* • and *first* commandment. •••

Emphatic.

“The *second* is *like* it: •
‘You shall *love* your *neighbor* • as *yourself*.’ •••

Simply.

Slowly on “the whole law is based”; then faster on “and the prophets as well.”

“On these *two* commandments • the *whole law* is based, •
and the *prophets* as well.” •••

The *gospel* of the Lord. •••