

If God is for us, who can be against us?

No force in heaven or on earth, no spiritual or physical danger can ever separate us from the love of God that comes to us through Jesus, our Lord.

BACKGROUND

The Letter to the Romans is exactly that, a letter sent by St. Paul to the Christian community of Rome. Of all Paul's letters, Romans is both the longest and the most organized in presenting his thinking.

The letter sometimes sounds like an essay, and it presents Paul's understanding of the good news of Jesus. In it Paul lays out one of his fundamental teachings—that salvation comes through faith, not through religious practices.

Paul wrote this letter to introduce himself to the Christian community of Rome that he had wanted to

visit for years. Since he also desired to travel from Rome to Spain for more missionary work, Paul was probably hoping to obtain the support of the Romans for his journey. But before any other travels, Paul was going to return to Jerusalem to deliver money he had collected for the Jewish Christians there.

Paul's principal message is that, through faith in Jesus, our loving God has made salvation available to all human beings.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

The eighth chapter of Romans, from which this selection is taken, is much beloved. Many have found comfort and strength in its words of encouragement and wisdom. It tells us that the Spirit, who is the power of the risen Jesus at work in those who follow him, has made it possible to live a new life.

Christ's Spirit has freed us from the bondage of sin and death. The Christian is constantly challenged, therefore, to forsake the ways of the flesh—sinful self-centeredness—and to live instead the new life of the Spirit—the love of God and neighbor.

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" asks the first line of this reading. That might sound like the boast of a couple bursting with confidence and pride, but the line refers not to the relationship between two individuals but to that between the Christian community and its Lord.

Why is this reading appropriate for a wedding liturgy? Marriage is a wonderful symbol of the love

God has for humankind. We said in this book's introduction that in the sacrament of matrimony, the man and woman not only administer the sacrament to each other, they become a sacrament, a holy sign, of the love of God for all people.

The love between wife and husband with its hills and valleys, its joys and sorrows, its times of passion and its lukewarm moments, reveals the whole history of God's relationship with human beings. That revelation is made to the couple, and through them, to the whole Christian community.

This scripture passage and the wedding ceremony broadcast the same message: God loves us unconditionally—nothing and no one can ever change that. By choosing this reading you remind yourselves, and those who will celebrate with you, that your love for each other is a mirror that reflects the passionate, mysterious and unending love God feels for all of us.

A reading from the letter of *Paul* to the *Romans* •••

Establish eye contact. Memorize first line. There is joy behind every word.

If *God* is for us, • who can be *against* us? ••
 Is it possible • that he who did not spare his *own Son* •
 but *handed* him over for the sake of us *all* •
 will not *grant* us all things *besides*? •••

Your tone suggests, “of course not,” to answer each question.

Who shall bring a *charge* against God’s *chosen* ones? ••
God, • who *justifies*? ••
 Who shall *condemn* them? ••
Christ Jesus, • who *died* • or rather was *raised up*, •
 who is at the *right hand* of God •
 and who *intercedes* for us? •••

Don’t rush.

Let pause marks help you vary phrasing.

Climax of reading.

Who will *separate* us from the *love* of Christ? ••
Trial, • or *distress*, • or *persecution*, • or *hunger*, •
 or *nakedness*, • or *danger*, • or the *sword*? ••
 Yet in all this we are more than *conquerors* •
 because of him who has *loved* us. ••

Convey Paul’s confidence.

“Principalities” possibly are evil spirits.

“Height” and “depth” are astrological terms: Even stars can’t separate us from God.

For I am *certain* • that neither *death* nor *life*, •
 neither *angels* nor *principalities*, •
 neither the *present* nor the *future*, • nor *powers*, ••
 neither *height* nor *depth* • nor any other *creature*, •
 will be able to *separate* us from the *love* of *God* •
 that comes to us in *Christ Jesus*, • our *Lord*. •••

The *word* of the Lord. •••

Be generous in offering hospitality.

Christian love reaches out with sincerity, compassion and hospitality to friends, strangers—and even enemies.

BACKGROUND

In this letter, Paul best states his belief that Christians are saved by faith, not by the religious actions they perform. But while it's true that Paul advises the Romans to reject any teaching that says they can be saved through their own efforts, he also makes sure they won't misunderstand him to mean that laws can be completely disregarded or that Christians have no responsibilities toward others and can ignore the will of God. He does this by including in his letter moral teaching. All of Paul's letters contain a section of practical advice for daily living like this one.

While acknowledging that Jewish law is no longer the standard for Christian conduct, Paul insists that Christians do have guidelines for living in the real

world, and their primary guideline is love—of God and neighbor. That is the heart of the law. Christians are under the obligation to respond with charity when facing the many challenging situations and tough decisions of their everyday lives.

Paul makes three requests of the Christians at Rome. First, instead of offering slain animals, Paul wants them to offer themselves as living sacrifices to God. Second, they should not allow their culture to warp them. And third, they should let God's Spirit transform them so they can understand God's will. According to Paul, these are not really options but a Christian's necessary response to the "mercies" or blessings God has given.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

A marriage ceremony contains an inherent tension. There is a proper and necessary focus on the bridal couple, but there is an equally necessary focus on the larger community of which the bride and groom are a part.

That second focus must never be lost or overshadowed by the concentration on the bride and groom. The love that a couple shares is the foundation that enables them to love others beyond themselves. "Love isn't love till you give it away," says the line of a song. Once they've given love to each other, a couple must ask, "Who else do we give our love to?"

This reading, especially the latter half of it, helps answer that question. That's why the entire reading, rather than the shortened version, is preferable.

The beginning of the second paragraph might sound like advice intended to help the couple in their

relationship with each other. At a wedding liturgy that would be an understandable assumption. But the focus would be too narrowly fixed on the marriage partners if the reading ended with the listeners still making that assumption. Paul's point is that our love must extend beyond our immediate circle to all those in need, even to our enemies.

Choosing this reading would provide a helpful reminder that marriage not only turns us in toward our partner, but out toward the world. It must enable us to bring love where it's needed. This reading can remind all present that our vocation as Christians requires us to "rejoice with those who rejoice" and "weep with those who weep."

A reading from the letter of *Paul to the Romans* •••

To be inclusive, add: “and sisters.”

To make this clearer, add: “which is your spiritual worship.”
Contrast “conform” and “transform.”

Note pause markings.

Add: “and sisters.”

Avoid a choppy, monotone delivery. Stress verbs.

Not giving orders but, rather, loving advice.

Eye contact. You’re trying to persuade.

Gradually slow your pace on the final sentence.

Brothers, • I *beg* you through the *mercy* of God •
to offer your *bodies* • as a *living* sacrifice, •
holy and *acceptable* to God, • your *spiritual* worship. •••
Do not *conform* yourselves to this age •
but be *transformed* by the *renewal* of your *mind*, •
so that you may *judge* what is God’s *will*, •
what is *good*, • *pleasing* • and *perfect*. •••
Your love must be *sincere*. ••
Detest what is *evil*, • *cling* to what is *good*. ••
Love one another with the affection of *brothers*. ••
Anticipate each other in showing *respect*. ••
Do not grow *slack* • but be *fervent* in spirit; ••
he whom you *serve* • is the *Lord*. •••

Rejoice in *hope*, •• be *patient* under trial, ••
persevere in *prayer*. ••
Look on the *needs* of the saints as your *own*; ••
be *generous* in offering *hospitality*. •••
Bless your *persecutors*; •• *bless* and do not *curse* them. ••
Rejoice with those who *rejoice*, •
weep with those who *weep*. ••
Have the *same* attitude toward *all*. •••

Put away *ambitious* thoughts •
and associate with those who are *lowly*. ••
Do not be *wise* in your *own* estimation. ••
Never repay *injury* with *injury*. ••
See that your conduct is *honorable* in the eyes of all. ••
If possible, • live *peaceably* with *everyone*. •••

The *word* of the Lord. •••

Glorify God in your body.

Our bodies are destined to be raised from the dead. They are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We must use them to glorify God.

BACKGROUND

The Christian community at Corinth was founded by Paul. Because of his familiarity with them, Paul was not afraid to talk to the Corinthians like a father or to expose their weaknesses right along with their strengths whenever he offered advice.

Corinth was an exciting and bustling seaport city that handled much commercial traffic. It also saw every kind of worship and every form of moral corruption the world can produce.

Paul had spent a year and a half preaching to the poor and disadvantaged population of that city. So when he later received word that his converts were engaged openly in religious fights, suing each other in the courts, even participating in religious prostitution and offering sacrifices to idols, Paul was understandably distressed.

Questions had arisen regarding pagan rituals and regarding the role of sex in the lives of Christians. At one end of the spectrum of opinions were those Corinthians who wondered whether single men and women should ever marry, since Christ's coming was expected soon. At the other end were those who believed that sexuality was not a moral issue; their attitude toward it was as relaxed as their attitude toward eating. "Everything is lawful for me" had become their slogan.

Paul wrote this letter to address these and other questions, and in the process of doing so he painted a rather detailed picture of the sometimes troubled early church. Paul loved the Corinthians and praised their strengths, but he pulled no punches when he criticized their weaknesses and their mistakes.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

Very few couples choose this reading for their wedding, and it's easy to understand why. Paul's talk about immorality hardly seems appropriate or uplifting language for a marriage ceremony.

So why is this reading included in the lectionary for weddings? Probably because Paul presents a perceptive theology of sexuality. He rebuts the casual attitude some Corinthians had toward sex by insisting that God does place value on what we do with our bodies. If God plans to raise our bodies from the dead, Paul argues, then they and everything we do with them must be important. Our bodies are "members of Christ," parts of Christ's body.

The behavior of every member, he continues, affects the holiness of the entire community. Because we have been redeemed at great cost, we belong not to ourselves

but to Christ. Therefore, he concludes, we must use our bodies to express the intimacy of our relationship with God, who is either glorified or dishonored by our use of sexuality.

That theology may seem well hidden in this passage, and the remarkably positive command to "glorify God with your body" may seem overshadowed by the negative language about fornication. Leaving out the sentence beginning "Every other sin a man commits . . ." can help emphasize the powerful sentence that follows, "You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within."

This passage provides the homilist with the opportunity to comment on the goodness of our bodies and the holiness of human sexuality.

A blunt message must be spoken with love and sustained eye contact.

A reading from the first letter of *Paul* to the *Corinthians* •••

Contrast “immorality” and “Lord.”

The *body* is not for *immorality*; ••
it is for the *Lord*, ••
and the *Lord* is for the *body*. ••

Contrast “Lord” and “us.” This is good news!

God, • who *raised up* the Lord, •
will raise *us also* by his *power*. •••

These lines are motivated by love for listeners.

Do you not *see* that your bodies are *members of Christ*? ••
But whoever is *joined* to the Lord •
becomes *one spirit* with him. •••

Using plurals makes the sentence more inclusive—“a man commits” becomes “people commit”; or leave out this sentence.

Shun lewd conduct. ••
Every *other* sin a man commits is *outside* his body, •
but the fornicator sins against his *own* body. •••

Like a kind teacher.

You must know that your body is a *temple* of the *Holy Spirit*, •
who is *within*— •
the Spirit you have received from *God*. •••

This is good news.

You are *not* your *own*. ••
You have been *purchased*, • and at what a *price!* ••
So *glorify* God in your body. •••

Sustain eye contact.

The *word* of the Lord. •••

There is no limit to love's power to endure.

No matter how many gifts a person has, without love they add up to nothing, for love is the greatest gift of all.

BACKGROUND

See the “Background” section for the previous reading (1 Corinthians 6:13–15, 17–20, page 57) for more information about Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

Among the issues that Paul was asked to resolve for the Christian community in Corinth was a question about “charisms.” These are the sometimes spectacular spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, prophesying and working miracles. Among some of the Corinthians, possessing these gifts had become a mark of honor and prestige. Speaking in other languages, the gift of tongues, especially was considered a sure sign of being filled with the Spirit. Often this gift was so overused that it became a distraction at prayer.

Paul writes the Corinthians to say that no gift is to be used for showing off, and every gift should contribute

to the building up of the whole community, not just the individual.

Though Paul encourages the Christians of Corinth to strive for these spiritual gifts, he points out that some are more necessary than others, and he lists them in order of importance. On his listing, the gift of tongues takes the lowest place. His goal is to show that as good as these gifts are, love is even better.

Paul is disappointed that the Corinthians are so caught up with flashy, nonessential things while neglecting the most important virtue of all. He considers the Corinthians' overemphasis on the spiritual gifts a sign of their immaturity: They are striving for gifts that will pass away; he wants them to strive for love that endures forever.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

This is probably one of the best known of Paul's writings. Certainly it is a favorite for weddings.

People complain about how overused the word love is, especially in song lyrics. We've all heard songs that either trivialize love or stereotype it or seem to have no understanding whatsoever of what it really is. Paul did not have that problem. But rather than define love, he personifies it—he speaks of it as if it were a living thing, and he helps us understand it by telling us what it does and doesn't do.

Each of the words Paul uses to describe love's behavior (patient, kind, not jealous) is chosen purposely to point out virtues that the Corinthians were not practicing in their daily lives. The value of this reading for a wedding liturgy lies in its ability to remind each of us of these virtues.

Paul is presenting a recipe for successful relationships, and love is the chief ingredient. To keep it

healthy, partners in a relationship must be patient and kind, says Paul; relationships will likely fail if partners are jealous, pompous, rude or self-serving.

The immaturity of which the Corinthians were guilty has not disappeared from the Christian community. Many are still attracted to the spectacular and flashy, but fewer are willing to do the hard work it takes to become grown-up people of love.

Today, as much as ever, all Christians, and especially two people taking on the challenge of marriage, need to be reminded that the spiritual gifts of visions and prophecy (or perhaps the material gifts of a home and car) might be brilliant fireworks that light the sky, but only the gift of love is a fire whose warmth draws people together in community—be that large (a parish) or small (a family).

Love's light helps us see the Christ in one another—in the needy stranger and the nearby spouse.

A reading from the first letter of *Paul to the Corinthians* ...

Establish eye contact. Like a kind teacher.

Set your *hearts* on the *greater gifts*. ••

I will show you the way which *surpasses* all the others. ...

Rising energy.

If I speak with *human* tongues • and *angelic* as well, •
but do not have *love*, ••

Don't stress "I" in any sentence.

I am a noisy gong, • a *clanging cymbal*. ...

A bit faster.

If I have the gift of *prophecy* •

and, • with *full knowledge*, • comprehend *all mysteries*, ••
if I have *faith* great enough to *move mountains*, •
but have not *love*, ••

Slower.

I am *nothing*. ...

A bit faster.

If I give *everything* I have to *feed* the *poor* •
and *hand over* my body to be *burned*, ••

Slower again.

but have not *love*, ••

I *gain* nothing. ...

Stress is on what love does and doesn't do, not on "love." Imagine "patience," "kindness," "anger," etc., as you read.

Love is *patient*; •• *love* is *kind*. ••

Love is *not jealous*, •• it does not put on *airs*, ••
it is not *snobbish*. ...

Love is *never rude*, •• it is not *self-seeking*, ••
it is not prone to *anger*; ••
neither does it *brood* over *injuries*. ...

Remember eye contact.

Love does not *rejoice* in what is *wrong* •
but rejoices with the *truth*. ••

Pause before final line.

There is no *limit* to *love's forbearance*, •
to its *trust*, • its *hope*, • its power to *endure*. ...

A three-word summary.

Love never fails. ...

The *word* of the Lord. ...

Love one another as Christ loved the church.

The union of woman and man symbolizes the union between Christ and the church.

BACKGROUND

In language that's often sublime, the Letter to the Ephesians speaks of God's plan for salvation that is made known to the world through the church, of which Christ is the head. This passage is from a section of ethical instructions addressed to family members—wives and husbands, children and parents, even slaves and masters.

Though he was often a visionary, the author of this letter (probably a student of St. Paul) was not immune to the cultural biases that characterized his society. On the face of it, what the author says about husbands and wives (“wives be submissive to your husbands”) is clearly sexist. For many centuries, in fact, these words

were used to justify the abusive dominance of men over women.

But we should not draw conclusions before examining the whole of the letter in which that statement is found. Does the rest of the text reinforce that seemingly sexist phrase?

In addition to asking what a text meant to the author who wrote it, we must also ask what it means to us, given the context of the entire writing in which we find it. Read in that way, Ephesians may be less troubling, for we begin to see that the heart of the message is one of mutual respect—of deferring to one another “out of reverence for Christ.”

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

There's no question that this passage poses problems. There are better choices for New Testament readings at a wedding. Many might like to ignore this passage altogether. But doing so would deprive us of the exalted view of marriage this letter presents.

Ephesians reminds us that in marriage two persons become one flesh. This wonderful, mysterious union, ordained by God from the beginning, models and reflects the mystical union between Christ and the church. This thinking is the basis for the church calling marriage a sacrament, a sign of God's life among us.

The opening sets the tone of the entire passage: “Follow the way of love.” The author asks everyone, male and female, to live in subordination to one another—to “defer” not because of the other's real or imagined superiority, but as a sign of “reverence for Christ.”

Though this letter echoes the social thinking of the time, which saw women as subordinate to men, the author is not merely parroting that culture. Instead, we are introduced to a new guiding inner spirit: mutual

respect that comes from doing everything out of reverence for the Lord.

Husbands are expected to love their wives “as Christ loved the church.” When we recall how Christ demonstrated that love—by laying down his life—we glimpse the kind of love that is demanded here.

In the church's relationship to Christ, the issue of inferiority or superiority never arises. Christ's superiority is not the concern; the concern is mutual love and humble service, each to the other. And there lies the value of this reading for a wedding. Although the language regarding a woman's submission to a man is a stumbling block, you'll find here a powerful message that calls wives and husbands to sacrificial love and to unselfish and loving service.

The shorter version of this reading, given in the lectionary and reprinted on page 68 in this book (Ephesians 5:2, 25–32), leaves out some of the sexist and troubling language, and preserves the exalted imagery of Christ's love for the church.

Establish eye contact.

A reading from the letter of *Paul* to the *Ephesians* •••

Follow the way of *love*, • even as *Christ* loved *you*. ••

He *gave* himself for us. ••

Most important line. Slowly.

Defer to one another out of *reverence* for *Christ*. ••

Wives should be submissive to their *husbands* •
as if to the *Lord* •

because the husband is *head* of his wife •

just as *Christ* is head of his body • the *church*, •

as well as its *savior*. ••

No preachiness.

As the *church* submits to *Christ* •

so *wives* should submit to their husbands in everything. •••

Eye contact. Note pauses.

Husbands, • *love* your wives, •

as *Christ* loved the *church*. ••

Stress the depth of love that's
being required.

He gave himself up for her to make her *holy*, •

purifying her in the bath of water by the power of the *word*, •

to present to himself a *glorious* church, • *holy* and *immaculate*, •

without *stain* or *wrinkle* • or *anything* of that sort. •••

Faster rate.

Trying to persuade. Slower.

Husbands should *love* their wives •

as they do their *own* *bodies*. ••

Reasoning like a lawyer.

He who loves his *wife* • loves *himself*. •••

Observe that *no one* ever *hates* his own flesh; ••

no, • he *nourishes* it and takes *care* of it •

as *Christ* cares for the *church*— ••

for we are *members* of his *body*. •••

Quoting Genesis 2:24.

“For this reason • a man shall *leave* his father and mother, •

and shall *cling* to his *wife*, •

and the *two* shall be made into *one*.” ••

Hushed quality, but not
actual whisper.

This is a *great* foreshadowing; ••

I mean that it refers to *Christ* and the *church*. ••

Upbeat summary; keep pace quick to the end.

In *any* case, • each one should *love* his *wife* •
as he *loves himself*, ••
the *wife* • for her part • showing *respect* for her husband. •••

The *word* of the Lord. •••

SHORTER VERSION:

EPHESIANS 5: 2, 25–32

Establish eye contact.

A reading from the letter of *Paul* to the *Ephesians* •••

Follow the way of *love*, • even as *Christ* loved *you*. ••
He *gave* himself for us. ••

Eye contact. Note pauses.

Husbands, • *love* your *wives*, •
as *Christ* loved the *church*. ••

Stress the depth of love that's being required.

He *gave* himself up for her to make her *holy*, •
purifying her in the bath of water by the power of the *word*, •
to present to himself a *glorious* church, • *holy* and *immaculate*, •
without *stain* or *wrinkle* • or *anything* of that sort. •••

Faster rate.

Trying to persuade. Slower.

Husbands should *love* their *wives* •
as they do their *own bodies*. ••

Reasoning like a lawyer.

He who *loves* his *wife* • *loves himself*. •••
Observe that *no one* ever *hates* his own flesh; ••
no, • he *nourishes* it and takes *care* of it •
as *Christ* cares for the *church*— ••
for we are *members* of his *body*. •••

Quoting *Genesis* 2:24.

“For this reason • a man shall *leave* his father and mother, •
and shall *cling* to his *wife*, •
and the *two* shall be made into *one*.” ••

Hushed quality, but not actual whisper.

This is a *great* foreshadowing; ••
I mean that it refers to *Christ* and the *church*. ••

The *word* of the Lord. •••

Clothe yourself with heartfelt mercy.

Because we know we are chosen and loved, we can dress ourselves in virtue and live a life of love.

BACKGROUND

In keeping with the structure of the letters of Paul, Colossians consists of two sections, one of teachings and the other containing practical advice.

The teaching section deals with the strange belief that spread in the city of Colossae regarding angelic beings. They were believed to control the lives of humans and the rest of creation as well. Jesus was thought to be just another of the many heavenly beings who were mediators between God and humanity.

The teachers of this strange doctrine claimed that to appease these spirits you had to acquire certain special knowledge that only they could impart. You were saved if you obeyed these teachers, worshiped angels and experienced visions.

The practical part of the Letter to the Colossians is a response to these odd beliefs. Rather than swallowing

the superstition fed them by the false teachers, rather than participating in cultic rituals and observing rules about what they could and could not eat or drink, this letter tells the Colossians to remember the requirements of the moral life they embraced when they accepted Jesus. Put your efforts here, the author tells them, where it really matters. Mercy, kindness, humility, patience—*these* are the qualities that distinguish a true follower of Jesus, who should not run scared from heavenly spirits.

In this passage from the letter to the Colossians, we hear a string of very practical recommendations given to guide the speech and action of all Christians in daily life. They can also be important recommendations for the beginning of married life.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

You already know that married life is going to be hard. This may be easy to forget as you plan your wedding and as idealism and romance dominate your thinking. But divorce statistics prove that marriage is hard, and the difficulties you've already experienced in your relationship may also have convinced you that it takes effort—a lot of effort—to make a marriage work.

The author of the letter to the Colossians (perhaps Paul or more likely one of Paul's students) seems to know it, too. Though this passage stops short of specific instructions for husbands and wives, what we have is very important guidance that lays the foundation for living a Christian life.

Anyone can say marriage is hard. Anyone can tell you to work at your relationship, and, no doubt, many or most couples do work hard to build their relationships. But here in this reading you will hear something

that everyone else does not say. We are reminded that working hard is not enough. On our own we're almost sure to fail.

This reading brings God into the picture and makes God's grace the source of any success we might have in our relationships. The author of this letter is wise enough to know that in order *to love* we need first to know that we *are loved*. Because we are "beloved," we hear, we must clothe ourselves in mercy, kindness and patience. What a rich image: wrapping ourselves in virtues, clothing ourselves in the love of God! But we can do those things only because we know that first we were chosen and made holy.

This advice is important for anyone, but for two people preparing to set out on the journey of married life, it is an invaluable road map that can lead to happiness and joyful union with each other and the Lord.

Make eye contact before you start. **A reading from the letter of *Paul* to the *Colossians* •••**

*Whole reading hinges on word
“Because.”*

Because you are God’s *chosen* ones, •
holy and *beloved*, ••

*Stress dressing images: “clothe,”
“put on.”*

clothe yourselves with heartfelt *mercy*, ••
with *kindness*, • *humility*, • *meekness*, • and *patience*. •••

Stress verbs: “bear,” “forgive.”

Bear with one another; ••
forgive whatever *grievances* you have against one another. ••
Forgive as the *Lord* has forgiven *you*. ••

Over *all* these virtues • put on *love*, •
which *binds* the rest together • and makes them *perfect*. ••
Christ’s *peace* must reign in your *hearts*, •
since • as members of the *one body* •
you have been *called* to that peace. •••

Speak as a wise counselor.

Dedicate yourselves to *thankfulness*. ••
Let the *word* of Christ, • *rich* as it is, • *dwell* in you. •••

Stress verbs.

In *wisdom* made perfect, •
instruct and *admonish* one another. ••
Sing *gratefully* to God from your *hearts* •
in *psalms*, • *hymns*, • and *inspired* songs. ••

Slower.

Whatever you do, • whether in *speech* or in *action*, •
do it in the name of the *Lord Jesus*. ••

High energy; don’t fade on ending.

Give thanks to *God the Father* • through *him*. •••

The *word* of the Lord. •••

Let us love in deed and in truth.

*Belief in Christ and love of one another are the heart of the gospel.
We must put that love into action and not just talk about it.*

BACKGROUND

This letter was motivated by a distressing situation in one of the early Christian communities. False teachers had so divided this community that splinter groups had formed, with each claiming to be the only one faithful to the gospel.

Ironically, the teaching that most characterized this community was insistence on unity and on love among believers. Now this community was falling apart. Members of one group refused hospitality to those of another and would have nothing to do with them. The false teachers who led the defections from the original

community were called “antichrists,” and those who followed them were accused of not having been true believers in the first place. Their departure was seen as proof that they had never really belonged.

Into the midst of this situation comes this letter. Its goal is twofold: to dispute the false ideas that denied the humanity of Jesus and to deepen the faith of the members of the community. The passage here is in the service of the second goal. It states the main theme of the letter: Believe in Jesus and love one another. But love must be action, not just talk.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

Members of the community were shocked by the fragmentation of their group. How could people whose goal was unity suddenly find themselves so divided? This is a natural question, but one difficult to answer. But this question is probably no less difficult than the question of why two people who freely choose to unite themselves to each other, and who publicly express their commitment to one another in marriage, would begin to experience division in their relationship and even break their commitment.

It may be surprising to us to read about problems in the early church. We may have thought that this was an ideal time, a sort of honeymoon period for Christianity. But the reality doesn't match that expectation. There is a parallel in marriage. When the honeymoon ends and the challenge of sustaining a relationship becomes apparent, we realize quickly that, without hard work and compromise and selfless love, relationships don't last.

This scripture passage acknowledges that truth. We must put our love into action. It also makes another

point important to people in relationships: We must learn not to be dependent on our feelings. Surely there will be days in a marriage when one or both of the partners don't feel like they're in love anymore. At such times we may have to rely not on our feelings but on our knowledge.

Pope John xxiii wrote, “The heart follows the mind almost as often as the mind follows the heart.” The author of the First Letter of John also knows that truth and encourages readers not to be victims of their feelings. “God is greater than our hearts.” Sometimes we have to keep believing until reason overwhelms the heart. And that's as true in a marriage as in any other situation in life.

When we know something is good for us even though it doesn't feel like it is, we don't just quit the job or throw away the medicine; we keep believing until, if we cling to what we know, the feelings follow. When we live a life of love-in-action, we can be sure, “no matter what our consciences charge us with,” that we are right with God.

A reading from the first letter of *John* ...

Sets a loving tone. Slowly.

Little *children*, •
let us love in *deed* and in *truth*, •
and not merely *talk* about it. ...

Faster pace.

Trying to reassure.

This is our way of *knowing* we are *committed* to the truth •
and are at *peace* before him •
no matter what our *consciences* may *charge* us with; ••
for God is *greater* than our hearts •
and *all* is known to him. ...

A beautiful phrase.

*Renew your efforts to encourage.
Make eye contact.*

Beloved, •
if our consciences have *nothing* to charge us with, •
we can be *sure* that God is with us •
and that we will *receive* at his hands • *whatever* we *ask*. ••
Why? ••

If we love, our prayers are heard.

Answer with renewed energy.

Because we are keeping his *commandments* •
and doing what is *pleasing* in his sight. ...

*Heart of the passage. Stress
“believe” and “love.”*

His commandment is *this*: ••
we are to *believe* in the name of his *Son*, • *Jesus Christ* •
and are to *love* one another as he *commanded* us. ••
Those who *keep* his commandments *remain* in him •
and he in *them*. ••

*Again, stress that we can realize
God loves us.*

And this is how we *know* that he remains in us: ••
from the *Spirit* that he gave us. ...

The *word* of the Lord. ...

Let us love one another, for love is of God.

God is love, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

BACKGROUND

See the “Background” discussion on page 77 of the First Letter of John for more information on this letter.

One of the earliest heresies to plague Christianity was “gnosticism,” meaning, literally, “knowledge-ism,” a belief that a person is saved only if she or he acquires special knowledge about God and about spiritual matters. Unless you are part of the “in” group, and therefore privy to the special information, you do not really know God.

The author argues here against a form of that belief. Knowledge of God is not a secret, mysterious thing possessed only by people “in-the-know.” The only proof one can give of “knowing” God is by loving other people. Those who talk about God, but do not

show love, do not possess God at all, but “everyone who loves,” the author insists, “has knowledge of God.”

The reason this is true is found in the extraordinary assertion that “God is love”—a statement that occurs nowhere else in the Bible. And how do we know that God is love? Because we have experienced it in the mystery of God sending Jesus.

Throughout the First Letter of John, the author stresses that the sure sign that we are one with God is that we keep the double commandment to believe in Jesus and love our neighbor. This passage focuses on the love of neighbor. But it also reminds us that in our loving relationship with God, it’s God who takes the initiative and loves us first.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

“If God has loved us so, we must have the same love for one another.” That wouldn’t make a bad slogan for a couple starting out.

God’s love is given freely, without any concern about our worthiness to receive it. God’s love is unconditional. God’s love is creative; it generates new life. God’s love is merciful. God’s love is self-sacrificing. Whatever we say about God’s love, we can hold up as the ideal toward which we strive in married love. This reading reminds us that marriage is an invitation and an opportunity to imitate the love of God.

Marriage is more than a sacrament we receive, it is also a sacrament we become, for we become a sacra-

ment—a living sign—of God’s love. This reading tells us why that is true. First it points out that “no one has ever seen God.” But it quickly adds that “if we love one another,” God lives in us so fully that we become living signs of God’s presence. God spills out of us and into the lives of those whose lives we touch. People will see God when they look at us because our love for each other mirrors God’s love for humanity.

This is one of the most popular of the wedding readings. The directness of its tone, its intimate language, and the compelling encouragement it gives to live a life of authentic love make it easy to understand why.

Read with frequent eye contact
and energy.

A reading from the first letter of *John* •••

The whole assembly is the
“Beloved.”

Beloved, •
let us *love* one another •
because love is of *God*; ••
everyone who loves is *begotten* of God •
and has *knowledge* of God. ••

“The one” or “Anyone” is more
inclusive than “The man.”

The man *without* love has known *nothing* of God, •
for *God is love*. •••

God took the initiative.

God’s love was *revealed* in our midst in this way: ••
he sent his *only Son* to the world •
that we might have *life* through him. •••

Slowly. Contrast “we” and “God”
with “he” and “us.”

Love, then, • consists in *this*: ••
not that we have loved *God*, •
but that *he* has loved *us* •
and has sent his *Son* as an *offering* for our *sins*. •••

Spoken with a sense of awe at
God’s goodness.

Make eye contact.

Contrast “God” and “us” with
“we” and “one another.”

Beloved, •
if God has loved *us* so, •
we must have the *same* love for *one another*. •••

Gradually slow your pace.

No one has ever *seen* God. ••
Yet if we *love* one another •
God *dwells* in us, •
and his *love* is brought to *perfection* in us. •••

The *word* of the Lord. •••

This is the wedding day of the Lamb!

All in heaven rejoice and sing “alleluia,” for it is the wedding day of the Lamb and the Bride. How happy are those invited to the feast!

BACKGROUND

This passage is part of a very special kind of biblical writing called “apocalyptic.” Often spectacular in style and content, apocalyptic books frequently are concerned with the future, not necessarily ours, but that of the author or of a character in the book.

In apocalyptic writing, authors often describe the grand and fantastic visions they have had. Mythical beasts, angels and devils, strange animals and great figures from the past are typical characters in their visions. But fascinating as they are, these images are never meant to be taken literally.

Apocalyptic writing was intended to offer hope to believers during times of danger or persecution. One reason this writing is so highly symbolic is that it is often critical of those in power. The use of symbolism protected both writers and readers from discovery and possible retaliation, because only those “in-the-know”

could decipher the imagery. So the rulers being criticized did not realize they were being attacked.

Written at a time when Rome was forcing its people to participate in emperor worship, the Book of Revelation brings courage to those Christians who were risking their lives by refusing to go along with this idolatry. Revelation tells its readers that God is not uncaring or powerless when it comes to the fate of the suffering but will intervene to rescue them from the clutches of evil. Humans alone can’t overcome the forces of injustice, but God can and will.

Revelation offers the hope of God’s eventual triumph and the promise of reward for those who remain faithful. The church uses this book at worship during Eastertime and during November, when the liturgy brings to mind the coming of the end of the world and the fulfillment of creation.

WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE THIS TEXT?

One of the most splendid images of the book of Revelation is that of the church as the bride of Christ. This passage includes that image to announce the beginning of God’s eternal reign. This may be the perfect reading if your wedding takes place during Eastertime, the seven weeks between Easter Sunday and Pentecost.

Throughout the Bible, marriage is used to symbolize the unique and unbreakable bond between God and God’s people. Here, the voice from the throne calls the entire church to break into joyous song to celebrate the marriage of the Lamb, who is Christ, and the whole community of believers, the church.

The passage echoes with joy and celebration: singing, jubilant shouts, crying out, even peals of thunder combine to create a mood of excitement and overwhelming happiness. All the rejoicing is over the

uniting of Christ with the community of the faithful, a mysterious union that will endure for all time. This reading provides an opportunity to draw the “classic” analogy between your marriage and the mystical marriage of Christ and the church. It is a reminder to those who assemble for your ceremony that what they are witnessing foreshadows the undefinable union that Christ will one day establish with all people.

The symbol of Christ as the groom and the church as the bride represents the intimate familiarity that exists between them. The use of this passage in a wedding liturgy says something of the great love to which we all are wed, God’s love, which is pure, intense and enduring, and which death cannot part. This wedding here and now is a first taste of the wedding between God and people that will last for all time.

A reading from the book of *Revelation* •••

Start slowly, then go a bit faster.

I, • *John*, • heard what sounded like a loud *song* •
of a great *assembly* in heaven. ••

They were *singing*: •

“*Alleluia!* ••

Each word is different.

Salvation, • *glory*, • and *might* • belong to our *God.*” •••

Gradually increase intensity, but not necessarily volume.

A *voice* coming from the *throne* cried out: •

“*Praise* our *God*, • all you his *servants*, •
the *small* and the *great*, who *revere* him!” •••

Imagine what you describe.

Then I heard what sounded like the *shouts* of a *great crowd*, •
or the *roaring* of the *deep*, •

or mighty *peals* of *thunder*, • as they cried: •

“*Alleluia!* ••

Joyful intensity, without rushing.

The *Lord* is *king*, •

our *God*, the *Almighty!* ••

Let us *rejoice* and be *glad*, •

and give him *glory!* •••

Climax of reading.

For this is the *wedding* day of the *Lamb*, ••

his bride has *prepared* herself for the wedding. ••

She has been given a *dress* to wear •

made of finest *linen*, • *brilliant white.*” •••

Spoken as an “aside.”

(The linen dress is the *virtuous deeds* of *God’s saints.*) •••

The *angel* then said to me: ••

“*Write this down:* ••

Happy are they who have been *invited* •

to the *wedding* feast of the *Lamb.*” •••

Gradually slow your pace on final words.

The *word* of the *Lord.* •••