

Greetings!

Would you ever think of attending a wedding and, while greeting the bride and bridegroom, you would critique and criticize her in front of him? Of course you wouldn't. What an insult it would be, not only to her, but to him as well!

Can you imagine how both the bride and bridegroom would feel if everyone passing by in the receiving line offered their observations on each aspect of what didn't look, or go just right?

Yet, think of how we talk about and treat Jesus' Bride, the Church. Week after week myriads of people criticize His Bride with no thought of how it makes Jesus feel.

I hope you'll stick with me for the next four weeks as I take you into the message of ***The Fourth Cup***. I believe that when we're finished you'll have a new appreciation for the Bride of Christ.

The Fourth Cup (1), The Bride

As the bridal march began its majestic cadence, we stood and turned to view the beautiful young Bride stepping through the sanctuary doors. The sparkle of Christmas lights, garland and red bows gave the December wedding a fairy tale atmosphere of wonder. Her father, with his daughter in hand, braced for their walk to the altar, as she glistened with beauty in the glow of the tiny white lights. Then I heard that inward voice that had so often directed me when God was about to share a thought with me. With His prompting, I turned not to face the Bride, but the Bridegroom.

"Watch him." I heard the voice say, as I looked past the faces that were watching the Bride and her father. With his best man at his side, he stood with anxious anticipation at the coming moments that would forever change his life. I wondered as I focused upon his facial expression, had I once looked as he did now, when my bride strolled toward me; his smile, his stance, he had never looked so proud, nor so accepting of her beauty. This was not just her moment, it was his as well.

As the Bride passed I could hear the swish of her gown, smell the fragrance of her perfume and sense the exhilaration of this moment, but it was the Groom that I focused on. As she took her place, he and his groomsman turned inward as the minister began their ceremony.

With their vows completed and rings exchanged, we cheered as they made their way down the aisle and beyond our sight. Nothing unusual had happened, and yet I felt that somehow God's lesson for me wasn't over.

As we made our way through the crowded reception hall toward the couple, I had almost forgotten that I was in the middle of a God moment. Wishing them well, we gave our congratulations and hugs, when I sensed God stepping in once again. With excitement, she replayed the ceremony for us offering her commentary when she said, "I looked awful! My

train followed to one side, my veil was crooked and my lipstick was smeared!" I thought she would never stop berating herself, when he interrupted her.

"Listen" I heard God say inwardly. The Groom's words came with such gentleness, "I didn't see any of that. What I saw was the most beautiful Bride in the world. You were perfect!" For a moment my thoughts returned to seeing him gaze down the aisle at his Bride, when I heard that voice again, "That is how I see my Bride, the Church."

In the noise of a crowded room, I was lost in God's presence. How often had I heard, or even quoted it myself, that Jesus would return for a Bride "*without spot or wrinkle.*" And now, I was hearing and seeing for the first time how much He loves His Bride! While we strive to make the Bride *perfect*, we have failed to see her through His eyes and with His heart; to understand a love so powerful that *He presents to Himself a Bride* who is without blemish!"

And that's just a thought . . .

Next Week: *The Fourth Cup (2), The Proposal*

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that ***He might sanctify and cleanse her*** with the washing of water by the word, that ***He might present her*** to Himself a glorious church, ***not having*** spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5:25-27 (***NKJV***)

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, ***cleansing her*** by the washing with water through the word, ***and to present her to himself*** as a radiant church, ***without*** stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Ephesians 5:25-27 (***NIV***)

For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. ***He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean***, washed by the cleansing of God's word. ***He did this*** to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish.

Instead, she will be holy and without fault.

Ephesians 5:25-27 (***NLT***)

My Final Word

I have found that it is easy to forget what we thought and how we felt when we were at the height of our love for someone. Ask any married couple who has had to endure tough times, their spouse's bad habits and a host of communication problems that are not always resolved, if they always feel *giddy* about the *love of their life*? I can almost guarantee you that their first response will be to laugh, and then they'll launch into a speech about how marriage is hard work if we're to make it last.

Each of us understands that the church, as a gathering of people, is sometimes an endurance test of our love and patience. If we're not careful, we will begin to see it only as a "gathering of people" and less for what it really is – His Bride. Maybe, as a pastor, I should have greeted the people each week with something like this, "I wish to welcome you today into this gathering of the Bride of Christ" and not to "our church." I wonder then if we would have been so quick to look for the faults in each other.

When I enter into a season of thinking negatively about the church (yes, it does happen), I'm reminded of that December night, a Bride and Bridegroom and a lesson from God. Then I tell myself, "God doesn't have any girlfriends. He only has a Bride."

Dressed for the wedding!

Chris



Coming!

I think you'll be both challenged and encouraged in the coming weeks with this series, *The Fourth Cup*. This week we looked at *The Bride*, next week we'll take a look at *The Proposal*, followed by *The Cup* and then *The Wedding Feast*.

So, I hope that not only will you *tune in*, but that you'll forward this to your friends as well. See ya next week!