

"MARRIAGE IS HONORABLE:"

A Study of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

"Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4). Marriage as ordained by God is to be held by man as high, holy, and honorable. It is sacred because God established and regulated it according to His own wisdom, will, and purpose. God's fundamental rule has always been one man for one woman for life.

In the Beginning: God's Ideal for Honorable Marriage

When God made male and female, He said, "It is not good that the man should be alone....Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:18-24). To "leave" the original home means to make the new one first in his life. To "cleave unto his wife" means to be inseparably bonded to her alone. To "be one flesh" means two lives are joined together as one, symbolized by the physical union of sexual intercourse. This fundamental rule of one man for one woman for life eliminates fornication, adultery, polygamy, concubinage, homosexuality, and bestiality.

When a man and a woman privately commit themselves to be married, and when they make a public promise in the legal and customary way, God Himself witnesses or ratifies this covenant so as to make it binding for life (Mal. 2:14; Rom. 13:1-4). "What God therefore hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). Man can desert his marital post and duties but cannot dissolve the actual bond and obligations set in place by God, just as a soldier cannot dissolve his obligations by deserting his post.

Falling Below God's Ideal

In ancient times men fell below God's intended ideal of one man for one woman for life. Any who practiced homosexuality or bestiality were put to death (Lev. 20:13-16). When adultery was committed, God prevented the guilty parties from contracting new marriages--they were put to death (Deut. 22:22).

God's law addressed other abuses such as polygamy, concubinage, and divorcing for every whim. The wisdom of God has broken man's stubbornness in surprising ways. God broke Israel's stubbornness in demanding a king by giving her a king, letting her suffer the consequences, and then taking away the king (Hos. 13:9-11). God broke Israel's stubbornness regarding departures from the marriage ideal in several ways. For a time He let them experience the bitter sorrows of polygamy and concubinage as a warning to all future generations. That tolerance was hedged with limits (Exod. 21:10; Lev. 18:18; Deut. 21:15-17).

The divorce craze was curbed with limits so severe as to discourage the desire for divorce: (1) Indecent conduct just short of adultery was the only ground; (2) the man had to sign a document giving his wife the right to marry another man; and (3) he could never get her back after her remarriage, even if the second husband died (Deut. 24:1-4). All in all, God made it clear that "he hateth putting away" (Mal. 2:16).

God's Ideal Renewed by Christ

Christ reaffirmed the basic rule of one man for one woman for life based on Genesis 2:24, thus eliminating all practices below that ideal. Speaking by his own inherent power as deity, he ended the Mosaic concession allowing divorce for a cause short of adultery. "But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery" (Matt. 5:31-32). A man who divorces his wife for any cause other than fornication creates a stumblingblock which may cause her to marry another man, contrary to God's will. She and the new man go to the bed of adultery in their new marriage. No man can divorce his wife, wait for her to fall into the bed of adultery, then claim to be an innocent party with the right to marry a new mate. The exception means that if a person's mate commits fornication, he or she may divorce the guilty party and not be held responsible for the subsequent adultery of the divorced mate.

Jesus again reaffirmed Genesis 2:24 when asked, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" The Pharisees protested in amazement that Moses' Law permitted the divorce of Deuteronomy 24, but Jesus showed that such divorce was not God's original design. Then, he himself spoke as one greater than Moses: "And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matt. 19:3-9).

All who heard him were shocked at the strictness of this unbending law (Matt. 19:10-12). When a man divorces his wife for any cause other than fornication, and marries a new mate, he goes to the bed of adultery. If he divorces her for fornication, he may marry a new mate and his marriage bed will be clean. The mere fact of him divorcing his original mate, for fornication or otherwise, does not free her to take a new mate. If she does, she goes to the bed of adultery. In all of this, divine law takes precedent over human laws, customs, and circumstances. "Waiting games," "racing to the courthouse," "fast talking" lawyers, corrupt judges, humanistic psychologists, "positive-mental-attitude" counselors, sympathetic relatives, and accommodating preachers cannot change God's law.

The basic rule is one man for one woman for life, the only exception being that when fornication occurs, the innocent mate may divorce the guilty party and marry again. God's wrath will fall upon those who live together and share sexual privileges without marriage, and upon those who do so in unscriptural marriages (Heb. 13:4). God will not tolerate legalized adultery in any form, whether it be the traditional polygamy of the Eastern world or the Western world's loose divorce laws allowing serial polygamy — plural wives one-at-the-time!

Proper Attitudes and Conduct in Marriage

God regulates the attitudes and conduct of husband and wife in marriage.

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church....Let every one of you...so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband" (Eph. 5:22-33). The husband's unselfish, patient, tender love leads the wife to follow his leadership with the same kind of love. Loving each other provides the basis for loving their children, who learn the same love for their parents who raise them "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:1-4). When a husband violates the duty of loving leadership, he breeds bitterness, rancor, and rebellion in the home--and God will not even hear his prayers!

Also, the wife or child who violates the duties of love causes chaos at home and incurs God's wrath (Col. 3:18-21; 1 Pet. 3:1-7).

A husband is responsible to provide for his family's physical needs by engaging in honest labor. If he refuses, he is "worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5:8; Eph. 4:28). Wives "guide the house" as "keepers at home" by putting their family's needs above their own selfish desires (1 Tim. 5:14; Tit. 2:4-5). Parents must cooperate in disciplining their children. "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Prov. 29:15).

It is good for a man to seek a wife, and a woman a husband, if they are willing to follow God's guidelines for marriage. Generally, marriage accommodates sexual purity by providing the fulfillment of normal sexual desires. Husband and wife must be sensitive to each other's needs. On the basis of good judgment, men are advised not to marry during a time of severe crisis, but eligible parties may marry at any time without sin (1 Cor. 7:1-9, 25-40). Even in crisis times, married people must remain married. If they violate this duty, they cannot later take new mates but must "remain unmarried, or be reconciled." Anyone married to an unbeliever must abide in that calling, but "a brother or a sister is not under bondage" to give up the peace of God in order to satisfy an infidel's demands--"if the unbelieving depart, let him depart" (1 Cor. 7:10-24). No one is allowed to marry a new mate in such situations. God does not dissolve the marriage bond when men desert its duties!

False Theories on Marriage and Divorce

The theories of "false teachers" promise "liberty" but make men slaves to sin (2 Pet. 2:1, 19). As with all other sins, men rationalize various violations of God's law on marriage.

1. "We are free to fulfill sexual desire at will with anyone since it is natural like hunger or an itch." God who made the body with its desires said, "The body is not for fornication....Flee fornication....glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:9-20).
2. "I can just live with someone without marriage because it is a mere social custom." True marriage involves a covenant witnessed by others including God Himself (Mal. 2:14-16; Matt. 22:1-14). Relatives, society, and the nation have legitimate interests in marriage as a moral institution establishing the family. A man who wants the privileges of marriage without its covenant duties serves his own selfish desires without regard for the soul, security, or reputation of his mate or children (Deut. 22:13-21; Heb. 12:8).
3. "God wants us to be happy, so will allow us to divorce and remarry at will if we are unhappy." God teaches that to remain with our mate in difficult circumstances protects the best interests of ourselves, our mate, and our children. True, lasting happiness comes from loving and obeying God, and loving "thy neighbor" (including one's wife and children) "as thyself," all of which is violated by divorce and adultery (Rom. 13:8-10).
4. "The law given by Christ is binding on Christians, not unbelievers." Christ based his law on the original law given to all humanity in Genesis 2:24, and said, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:3-9). Saints and sinners are married under this law; there is no other.
5. "Moses and Christ gave the same instructions on marriage, including the right of both parties to marry new mates after a divorce." God's ideal in Genesis 2:24 never changed, but He gave variance legislation in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 to deal with man's stubbornness until He could bring men back to the ideal through the law of Christ. Christ ended the temporary variance of Moses' Law which allowed divorce for a cause short of fornication. In contrast to Moses, Christ taught one man for one woman for life, with this one exception: When fornication occurs, the innocent party can divorce the guilty one and marry again (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:3-9).
6. "When a divorce occurs for fornication, both parties are free to marry new mates." Both parties are free from marriage to each other, because God Himself dissolves that duty, but He authorized only the innocent party to marry a new mate. The force of the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 is this: Whosoever shall put away his wife for fornication, and shall marry another, doth not commit adultery. This gives positive divine authority for the innocent party to take a new mate, not for the fornicator.
7. "Baptism sanctifies the adulterous marriage." No, baptism forgives the past sin of adultery and forbids any return to the bed of an adulterous marriage (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Repentance precedes baptism and the "works meet for repentance" require a person to end sinful conduct and relationships (Matt. 3:8; Mk. 6:17-18; Acts 2:38; 26:20).
8. "Adultery in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 refers to 'covenant breaking' not in sexual infidelity but in the legal aspect of divorcing, or in the legal steps of divorcing and making new marriage vows." Divorcing and taking marriage vows with a new mate violate the original marriage obligations but do not constitute adultery. The bed of a scriptural marriage is honorable, but the bed of an unscriptural marriage is adulterous (Heb. 13:4). Adultery refers to the sex act, as is evident in John 8:4, "This woman was taken in adultery, in the very act."
9. "1 Corinthians 7:15 releases a believer deserted by an unbeliever to marry a new mate." No, it teaches a believer not to sacrifice her faith and peace with God to satisfy the demands of an unbeliever, but says nothing about taking a new mate. Christ said a divorced woman goes to the bed of "adultery" if she takes a new mate (Matt. 5:32).

New theories and twists will come and go because "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13). The Word of God stands firm, true, and unalterable. Those who pervert it "trouble you, subverting your souls" (Acts 15:24; Gal. 1:6-9).

Our Choice Today: A Blessing or A Curse

God has always given people the choice of the blessing which attends obedience or the curse which attends disobedience (Deut. 27:12-13; Matt. 25:46). The Word of God gives the only foundation for a secure, stable, happy home life. God designed marriage as a blessing to men, women, and children (Ps. 127:3-5; 128:3). We curse ourselves and our homes when we violate His teaching by neglecting or deserting our family duties.

God blesses a nation which respects principles of truth and righteousness in the home (Prov. 14:34). The family is the basic building block of a strong nation. When we walk away from our family obligations to pursue selfish pleasures, we tear and destroy the very fabric of our nation.

The evil effects of easy divorce are myriad. It involves the wickedness of lying and betrayal--God calls it treachery or treason (Mal. 2:14-16). An impenitent man who cannot be trusted to keep solemn vows made before God and men cannot be trusted to keep his word about anything. Such covenant breakers sear their conscience, mar their character, and kill the "natural affection" owed to their mate (Rom. 1:31; 2 Tim. 3:3). Abandoned women and children often fall into the pit of poverty and privation. Children raised without a father are often emotionally troubled, morally confused, vulnerable to sexual abuse, and unable to keep their own commitments.

Adulterous parents debase themselves with one-night stands, live-in partners, and unscriptural marriages--and often suffer debilitating venereal diseases. A broken-hearted little girl spoke words of truth when she protested her father's absence, "If two people made you, then you should still be with those two people" (Time, 28 June 1993, p. 53).

The strength and stability of our families have a direct bearing on the welfare of the church. Elders, deacons, preachers, and other Christians who commit adultery and who abandon their families are a shame, a disgrace, and a curse to the cause of Christ. Such conduct gives "great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme" (2 Sam. 12:14). "They which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19-21). Those who do such things are a dangerous leaven which must be purged from the church if they refuse to repent (1 Cor. 5). Those who justify and defend such conduct endanger the souls of men and the truth of the gospel, and they must be exposed, reproved, and marked if they refuse to repent (Matt. 5:19; Rom. 16:17-18; Tit. 1:9-14; 3:9-11).

When controversies arise, let us appeal to God's Word as the final and only standard of authority. Let us determine to "speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). Let us test and examine all things in the light of that Word, resolving to "hold fast that which is good" and to abstain from all else (1 Thess. 5:21-22). Let us remember that the Bible ground is the only unity ground God approves, and all departures from that ground eventually breed strife and division. Jesus prayed for our unity and for the success of our mission of converting the lost, on the basis of our abiding in the truth of God's Word. "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth," he said, as he prayed, "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn. 17:17-21).

"Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4). Let us hold marriage as high, holy, and honorable by teaching the truth of God's Word and living by it. God's rule is one man for one woman for life. "Let us walk by the same rule" (Phil. 3:16). May each one of us sincerely commit ourselves to live by that rule!

If we have lived contrary to God's law, there is still hope. The blood of Christ will cleanse all who have never obeyed the gospel if only we submit to him in faith, repentance, confession of Christ, and baptism (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38). When Christians fall into sin, God still is ready to forgive if we repent, confess our sin, and pray for pardon (1 Jn. 1:9). The gospel calls all men to "repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance" (Acts 26:20). Christ invites the weary sinner, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).