

IS MARRIAGE A RIGHT OR A RESPONSIBILITY?

Today's Text: Matt. 19: 1-15

Extracts:

The Pharisees also came to [Jesus], testing Him, and said to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate." ... *His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry."* But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given" [Matt. 19: 3-6, 10-11]

*On 4 November 2008, California voters (USA) approved **Proposition 8** which has defined marriage as "the union of a man and a woman."¹ A proposition if approved has the effect of amending the State's constitution. Similar measures are in operation in 27 other states in the country. In addition, voters in Arizona, Florida and Arkansas during the same November 2008 general elections approved measures limiting adoption rights only to married couples, that is, those in unions of a man and a woman.*

*Article 16 of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (a United Nations instrument) states that "Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family."² On that basis, couples in marriage relationships other than the union of one man and one wife claim that their fundamental human right to marry is being infringed.*

In this week's study, Jesus has said that marriage is meant only for those "to whom it has been given" [Matt. 19: 11]. Does that make it a human right or a divine responsibility? What then is marriage and who is married in the sight of God? Let us find out from this week's exciting study!

¹ Based on "California Gay Marriage Banned As Proposition 8 Passes," *The Huffington Post*, 11-5-08, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/11/05/california-gay-marriage-b_n_141429.html

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Declaration_of_Human_Rights

1. Background: Marriage is much more than a legal document!

The Pharisees came to Jesus to test Him. So they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” [Matt. 19: 3]. Instead of giving them a simple and straight-forward answer, He decided to use the opportunity to first establish what constitutes marriage before God, something that began from our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. Here are the key points that our Lord made:

a) *Marriage is only for human beings*

Jesus began by saying to the Pharisees, “Have you not read that He who made them *at the beginning* made them male and female?” [v. 4]. That takes us immediately back to the first few chapters of Genesis, the very first book in the Bible. There, we note that when God had created the birds and later the beasts, He blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply” [Gen. 1: 22]. Of course, they were male and female, as we can establish from the animals that went with Noah into the ark before the deluge [Gen. 7: 2]. But when it came to creating man, God made him “*in His image, in the image of God. He created him; male and female He created them.*” Then He “blessed them, and . . . said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” [Gen. 1: 26-27].

One can easily get confused about the use of “him” and “them” interchangeably! However, that should not be because, in the book of the genealogy of Adam, we read that “in the day that God created man, He made *him* in the likeness of God. He created *them* male and female, and blessed them and called them ‘Mankind’ (NKJV) or ‘Adam’ (KJV)” [Gen. 5: 1-2]. The process for creating Adam is described in Genesis Chapter 2. We are told, “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; *and man became a living being*” [Gen. 2: 7]. So, the woman, Eve, was at the time an integral part of her husband, Adam. Since they were made in God’s image and likeness, they shared divine qualities and responsibilities. For example, Adam named all the creatures created by God [v. 19] and he was given freewill [vv. 16-17]. When God discovered that the man had no companion, He performed the first recorded surgical operation in history by putting Adam to sleep and forming the woman, Eve, out of one of his ribs [vv. 20-22].

Adam woke up to find a pretty woman by his side. He did not ask any questions. He simply took her as his wife, the bone of his bones and the flesh of his flesh. He named her “Woman” “because she was taken out of man” [v. 21]. There was no wedding ceremony but it was a valid marriage in the sight of God! It confirms that from the beginning, God instituted

marriage as between a man and a woman, and He sanctions and blesses human procreation only within that framework. Birds and beasts can multiply but they are not made in God's image and they do not need marriage in order to procreate. Consequently, sexual morality only applies to human marriages.

b) *A husband and wife are inseparable units of one indivisible whole*

Quoting more from Genesis, Jesus added what the Pharisees should have already known that said, "For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and *the two shall become one flesh*. So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate" [**Matt. 19: 5 -6**].

In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul presented the relationship between a man and his wife as akin to the one between Christ and the church [**Eph. 5: 22-33**]. Paul enjoined husbands to love their wives "just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her." Husbands ought to love their own wives as themselves and "he who loves his wife loves himself." In another place, Paul writes that "the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does (a)nd likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body but his wife does" [**1 Cor. 7: 4**]. If a husband and wife are looking for the good of each other, they are practising marriage as God has designed it.³

From the forgoing, we see that marriage in God's eyes is much more than a social or legal contract. God invented the institution for His own grand design for the perpetuation of the human species. Let us pay attention to the following key features of divinely-sanctioned marriages:

- Just as God chose Eve for Adam, so He can choose the spouse that He knows is your soul-mate.⁴ For example, God influenced the choice of Rebekah as the wife of Isaac, Abraham's son of promise. When they brought her to Isaac, a woman that he had never met before, "he took (her) and she became his wife, and he loved her" [**Gen. 24: 67**]. What was the outcome of their marriage? Of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it was only Isaac who stuck to one wife. During the first 20 years of his marriage, there was no child [**Gen. 25:26**] and, yet, Isaac did not go aside to have a child by another woman as his father had done with Sarah's maid, Hagar [**Gen. 16: 1-2**]. With patience, God gave him twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Until his death at age 180 [**Gen. 35:28**], there is no

³ For a good study of the subject, read, "Happily Married Everyday For Life," *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2 No. 15: 24 June 2001;

http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/Happilymarriedeverydayforlife.pdf

⁴ "Let God Choose Your Spouse," *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2 No. 14: 3 June 2001;

http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/LetGodchooseyourspouse.pdf

evidence that he remarried, an indication that he and Rebekah lived to ripe old age [**Gen. 49:31**]. Therefore, whether God asks you to marry a harlot as in the case of the prophet Hosea [**Hos. 1: 2**], or not to marry at all, as in the case of the prophet Jeremiah [**Jer. 16: 2**], it is all for His purpose!

- Divorce is an *outcome* of a bad or non-existent marriage, not a license to bail out. For example, when Jesus spoke with a Samaritan woman by the well about the kingdom of God, He asked her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” When she replied that she had no husband, He told her, “You have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ *for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband!*” [**Jn 4: 16-18**]. That woman could have had a valid legal certificate of marriage to her sixth husband. But in God’s eyes, marriage is not a social or legal contract. Such contracts have termination clauses that we popularly call divorce. Marriage from God’s perspective cannot be dissolved *by man*. That was what Jesus meant when He said, “What *God has joined together*, let no man separate” [**Matt. 19: 6**]. How then can we recognize a God-sanctioned marriage?

2. Human right versus divine responsibility

In response to the Pharisees’ confusion why Moses should have permitted divorce when God did not allow it, Jesus said that it was because of the hardness of their hearts but that it was not so from the beginning. He then reiterated, “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” [**vv. 7-9**].

What constitutes sexual immorality? We can understand it when we examine the *purpose of sex* within the *context of sexual relations*. God created sex for procreation [**Gen. 1: 26-27**] and recreation [**Song of Solomon**]. But you do not have to be married to have children or to make love for enjoyment. The marital responsibilities of a married person are certainly different from those of the unmarried person. Let us examine a few situations:

a) *Kinship building*

This is the primary duty of the union of a man and a woman, and God has ordained it for the perpetuation of the human species. We call some people our parents or siblings, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces or cousins by virtue of blood relationships. Animals also reproduce but they do not have kinship relationships. That is why, among dogs, for example, siblings can sire puppies from the same bitch!

God has over time prescribed circles outside of which people can pick their spouses. For example, we would expect that after the flood, the wives married by Noah’s immediate descendants were their cousins or closer

relatives. For example, Sarah, Abraham's wife, was his half-sister [**Gen. 20: 11-12**]. As populations grew and the nation of Israel emerged, God commanded kinship rules that forbade marriages between kin, such as parent and child, brother and sister, uncle and aunt, husband and sister-in-law, etc [**Lev. 18: 1-30**]. At all times, God has always forbidden sexual relations, not to talk of marriage, between couples of the same sex [**Gen. 19: 4-9; Lev. 18: 22; Rom. 1: 24-32**]. Therefore, *any marriage contracted between two consenting adults that violates God's kinship rules, no matter how many children have been produced, is a solid ground for divorce that God allows*. In the Catholic Church, such marriages are annulled, meaning they never took place!

There are also some couples who claim to be married but are not. They may call it elegant names, such as "common law marriage" or "trial marriage" or "co-habiting," or "Green Card marriage," etc. Some engage in bigamy (legally married to two spouses *at the same time*). Some of them are raising babies already. Such couples are actually practising fornication or adultery. However, those who commit adultery risk bringing calamity on themselves and their households. The word of God says, "Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; He who does so destroys his own soul" [**Prov. 6: 12**]. Such *relations based on sexual immorality can be broken up. On the surface, they look like divorce but before God, it is repentance!*

For those who keep their marital vows of fidelity to their spouses, God has great blessings for them. For example, the Psalmist says of the man that fears God, "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house; your children, like olive plants, all around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord" [**Ps. 128: 3-4**].

b) *For pleasure*

Child bearing is a small part of a couple's life together. Some times, the relationship may not produce children but that should not end the marriage. Therefore, friendship and companionship are crucial parts. God wanted a help mate for Adam and He made him a wife. Sooner than later, children grow up and move out and you wind up with an empty nest. That is why you need to develop a relationship with your spouse beyond baby making.

Sexual urges are about the strongest hunger that human beings experience. If they are not properly channeled, they can lead us to sexual immorality. That is why the word of God says, "It is better for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband." It adds, "Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give

yourselves to fasting and prayer, and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of lack of self-control” [1 Cor. 7: 1-2, 5]. So, marriage allows you to have sexual pleasures and not feel guilty about them!

In summary, we can say that divorce (or break- up) is in order if, for example, you (a) find yourself making babies or having sexual relations with a partner who is not your spouse, or (b) your union was procured for a temporary advantage, such as to have a regular sex partner without the obligations of formal marriage, or (c) for a fraudulent purpose, such as to obtain legal immigration status. In all such and similar cases, you are practising sexual immorality. There was no marriage in the first place, and divorce is thus a form of repentance. In all other cases, marriage is “till death do us part!” That one is a great responsibility for which you need God’s guidance.

3. Conclusion: Accept it only if you can!

In response to the disciples’ comment that it is better not to marry than to face the hard test of divorce, Jesus said that marriage, as God has prescribed it, is “only for those to whom it has been given” [Matt. 19: 10-11]. Therefore, it is not compulsory to get married. You do not have to be married to please God. For example, Paul had no wife [1 Cor. 7: 8-9; 1 Cor. 9: 5] but he was a great apostle of Christ that took the Gospel to the Gentiles. In the words of Jesus, there are some people that were born eunuchs; there are some that were made eunuchs; and there are those that have made themselves eunuchs “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.” Whoever is able to accept that can do so [Matt. 19: 12]. That last case is called celibacy that the Roman Catholic Church demands of its clergy.

Marriage is not a human right. It is a divine responsibility. If you cannot do it right, don’t even try it!