

## **IS YOUR MARRIAGE AN ORDEAL OR AN IDEAL?**

**Today's Text: 1 Cor. 7:1-40**

### **Extracts:**

**Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good 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. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his body, but the wife does. 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 your lack of self-control [1 Cor. 7: 1-5]***

*A Scottish-born property tycoon, Scot Young (51), married Michelle Young (48) in USA in 1995 and they have two daughters.<sup>1</sup> They enjoyed an enviable lifestyle- owning lavish homes, luxury cars, travelling by private jet and a yacht in Monaco. For her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday (2005), he reportedly gave Michelle diamond jewellery worth £1 million (US\$1.53 million). But in 2006, they separated when Scot claimed that he was broke due to unanticipated business failures. His wife went back to the UK where she sued for divorce. In 2011, after acrimonious hearings, the court ordered him to pay her £27,500 (US\$41,993) monthly maintenance. He did not pay and also refused to disclose details of his finances. In January 2013, he was jailed for contempt of court.*

*By their wealth and lifestyle, many of us would have envied the Youngs as enjoying an ideal marriage. They had it all- money, children, discretion. Yet, their marriage collapsed and their divorce has been bitter and not yet done with after so many years in the court. Can you imagine how all that is telling on their daughters and other family members? So, if money cannot buy them love and a happy marriage, what does it? Is your marriage an ordeal, like that of the Youngs, or an ideal, the type you will love to have and to hold "till death do us part"? Then you may need to pay attention to Paul's message to believers in the church at Corinth who had specifically asked for his guidance on the thorny question. In this week's Bible verses, he has powerful words for husbands and wives that are desirous to have an ideal marriage. I am sure that you cannot wait to hear it!*

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<sup>1</sup> Story is based on: Jane Croft, "Property tycoon jailed in divorce case," *Financial Times*, Wed., Jan. 16, 2013; <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/352459c2-5c09-11e2-ab38-00144feab49a.html#axzz2ZUZLY6J6>

## 1. Background: Principles of marriage

In last week's study [Vol. 14 No. 22, 14 June 2013], we treated the subject of sexual immorality in God's house. Perhaps a very good follow-up is the one on marriage. The former tells us what not to do; the latter provides a positive and effective solution to sexual immorality. Therefore, you had better pay attention!

***Marriage is more than the wedding ceremony.*** In fact, soon after that happy event, everybody leaves you and your spouse alone to "get married." That is when the rude shocks begin. You may soon find that all that marriage counselling by your parents and priests cannot even address the envelope of marriage, not to talk of its contents! ***Why do you think the word of God tells a husband to love his wife [Eph. 5: 25] if he was supposedly in love with her before they got married?*** What will it take for husbands to dwell with their wives with understanding so that their prayers be not hindered [1 Pet. 3: 7]? Clearly, there is much more to marriage than meets the eye. For example, if you cannot run your home well, how can you take care of the house of God [1 Tim. 3: 5]? That is why we need to pay more attention to the relationship we share with our spouses, the very foundation of a happy family life.

Let us agree on our working definitions. What would you consider to be ***an ideal marriage?*** ***It is the one that is founded on the fear of the Lord.*** The Psalmist says, "Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. ***When you eat the labour of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. 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: 1-4]. There are many couples who have successful children and very unhappy marriages. There are many couples who have no children at all and yet they are extremely happy together. ***Therefore, happiness in a marriage depends largely on the extent to which the wife is in "the very heart" of her husband's house.*** Otherwise, the marriage becomes an ordeal. This will become clearer later.

For guidance, let us examine what Paul wrote back to the church in Corinth that had requested him to lay down some principles for them concerning marriage. The following should be noted:

### a) *Marriage is not compulsory!*

Paul wrote, "It is good 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" [1 Cor. 7: 1-2]. In other words, Paul is saying that marriage is not compulsory; it is not for everybody. This is an important point. ***Marriage is a choice, not a right.*** You do not need marriage to have children or make love. But if you choose to do those

things in the fear of the Lord and you have what it takes to marry, go ahead and do so.

What does it take to get married? Jesus addressed that question when He instructed about divorce. He mentioned three categories of people who cannot or should not marry. They are “eunuchs who were born thus from their mother’s womb” [*the impotent*], “eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men” [*the castrated*] and people “who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” [*the celibate*]. He added, “He who is able to accept it, let him accept it” [**Matt. 19: 1-12**]. So, marriage is not for everyone.

b) *But if you must marry, you must abide by the rules!*

We can add to Christ’s list some people who may be physically endowed to marry but do not have the temperament to do it as required. For example, some people just want to be mere sperm or egg donors<sup>2</sup> and that is why in some societies, children are “hatched” by single parents. But Paul warned the believers at Corinth, “Because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband” [**1 Cor. 7: 2**]. The rules binding husbands and wives in such relationships are as follows:

- The husband must render to his wife the affection due to her; and likewise also, the wife to her husband [**v.3**];
- The wife does not have authority over her body, but the husband does; and vice versa [**v. 4**];
- They should not deprive each other except by mutual consent to give themselves to fasting and prayer, so as not to allow Satan the opportunity to cash in on their lack of self-control [**v. 5**];
- Unmarried people and widows should remain celibate if they can exercise self-control. Otherwise, they should get married “For it is better to marry than to burn with passion” [**v. 8**]
- The rest of the chapter covers issues that can turn a marriage into an ordeal (such as divorce or the threat of it) [**vv. 10-24**] and issues for the unmarried and widows [**vv. 25-40**].

***In sum, Paul is drawing our attention to the need to invest our attention, time and resources on promoting continuous compatibility in marriage that can lead to a happy married life over time.*** Marriage is analogous to the relationship between Christ and His church [**Eph. 5: 22-33**]. That is why marriage is a major target for Satan’s incessant attacks. Should believers play into his hands with their troubled marriages? God forbid! How then should we deal with the matter as it affects our own marriages?

<sup>2</sup> “Are you a father or a sperm donor?” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 5, No. 31: 7 Nov. 2004; [http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume\\_5/PDFs/31\\_Fatherorspermdonor.pdf](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_5/PDFs/31_Fatherorspermdonor.pdf)

## 2. How to apply it to your situation<sup>3</sup>

You may already be married and so quite familiar with some of the views expressed here. You may be about to get married and you may need to pay serious attention so as to avoid the pitfalls of your elders. Even for some of us who have been married for close to forty years, you still find that each day is a new experience. That is why sharing the same bed with the same person for so long never gets boring! Here are some simple rules that will help your situation:

### a) *Let God choose your spouse*

For readers who are not yet married, the starting block is to let God choose your spouse. The word of God says, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the LORD” [Prov. 18: 22]; and “a prudent wife is from the LORD” [Prov. 19: 14]. ***Marriage is supposedly for a life time. So, how can those transient things you list for an ideal spouse (such as beauty, wealth, etc) hold up over time? Only God who knows the end from the beginning can say what is best for you.*** For example, when Abraham sent his servant to his home country to get a wife for Isaac, he went on his knees to ask God to choose the bride for his master’s son. That was how Rebecca (Rebekah) was chosen [Gen. 24: 1-67]. It is instructive that, of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, only Isaac married one wife and they lived to a ripe old age [Gen. 35: 28; Gen. 49: 31].

***When God chooses your spouse, it suggests that you go into marriage by faith, not by love!*** For example, we are told that Isaac “took Rebekah and *she became his wife, and he loved her*” [Gen. 24: 67]. He married her before he fell in love with her. That is instructive.

### b) *Understand the meaning of love!*

When you say to your spouse, “I love you with all my heart,” which heart are you talking about? Clearly, it cannot be the one pumping blood in your body because it could be defective! Therefore, love is deeper in meaning than we use it so glibly. The word of God tells us to love God with all our ***heart, soul and mind*** and ***our neighbours as ourselves*** [Matt. 22: 37-40]. From that, we can infer that love is more than physical. So, if we are to relate to our neighbours as we relate to God, then our love for them should

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<sup>3</sup> This section draws heavily from 2 popular articles in the *Weekly Bible Study Series*, namely: “Let God choose your spouse,” Vol. 2 No. 14, 3 June 2001; [http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume\\_2/PDFs/LetGodchooseyourspouse.pdf](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/LetGodchooseyourspouse.pdf) ; and “Happily married everyday for life,” Vol. 2, No. 15; 24 June 2001; [http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume\\_2/PDFs/Happilymarriedeverydayforlife.pdf](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/Happilymarriedeverydayforlife.pdf)

be more than physical. The closest neighbour to you is your spouse. So, how can you love your spouse with your heart, soul and mind?

You are one person but with three natures- the physical (body), the mind (the head) and the soul (the heart). Your spouse also has those three natures. That means that you can express love to each other in NINE different ways, as shown in the chart below.

		Ways you show love to your spouse		
		Body	Head	Heart
Ways your spouse shows love to you		1	2	3
	Body	[Lovers]		
	Head	4	[Friends]	6
	Heart	7	8	9 [Soul mates]

However, only three of those nine [1, 5 and 9] are compatible to true love. When your spouse goes in the direction of 2 and 3 and you in the direction of 4 and 7, you are looking for friendship and spiritual bonding outside of your marital home. That exposes you to adultery, gossip and hypocrisy. But if both of you go in the direction of 1,5 and 9, *your spouse becomes your only lover* [Song of Solomon 8: 7], *best friend* [Prov. 18:24; Matt. 14:15] *and soul mate* [Prov. 31:11]! What else are you looking for outside?

c) *Keep the love flame burning!*

*Physical love is based on lust which can burn out quickly. Therefore, the only way to keep it burning is to make your home and bedroom as attractive as ever.* So, you and your spouse must remain clean and attractive. You must remain the bride he married some years ago and he must remain the groom by continuing to groom. Watch everything about your body (weight, food, dressing, etc) except your height!

*As friends, you must speak the truth to each other.* Where decisions need to be made concerning number of children and their spacing, family budgeting, etc, be logical and realistic. Both of you should understand and agree on them *together*.

*On spiritual matters, find time, preferably early in the morning, when the whole family can share the word of God and pray together.* Make it a routine practice to cover the Bible from Genesis to Revelation at least once each year. How can you hope to easily find what you are looking for in a supermarket that you hardly know?

In sum, *lust is okay if it is directed only at your spouse*. However, it is easily uncontrollable without the mind to watch over it [**Job 31: 1**]. The mind cannot control lust unless it is transformed by being renewed so that it can discern the will of God [**Rom. 12: 2**]. *A renewed mind has the mind of Christ and so can know the mind of God* [1 Cor. 2; 16]. So, *if your spouse is your only lover, your best friend and your soul mate, then you have an ideal marriage. Anything less is an ordeal*. That is Paul's message to the church at Corinth and to us.

### 3. Conclusion: Imitate Christ!

As His disciples disputed among themselves who should be considered the greatest, Jesus reminded them that the kings of the Gentiles exercised lordship over them, and people who exercised such authority were called benefactors; but it was not so among His disciples. On the contrary, "He who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves... Yet, I am among you as the One who serves" [**Lk 22: 24-27**]. That should be your attitude to your marriage.

In Paul's words, a man does not have authority over his body but his wife does, and vice versa. Therefore, they are to render to each other the affection that is due [**1 Cor. 7: 2-3**]. *In your home, there should be no rights, only responsibilities*. Who gets home first starts the work to be done and the other joins. Gadgets, such as domestic staff will one day go when you are retired and can no longer afford them. Your children will grow up and leave you with an empty nest sooner than you think. In no time, you will find that you and your spouse are alone! You are either total strangers (if you have ignored the foundations of a happy marriage over the years) or love-birds, about to begin a new honeymoon! You will become happier. Let those who envy you call you names! In no time, you will prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers [**3 Jn 2**]. That is the ideal marriage. *Imitate Christ by demonstrating your leadership through service, not entitlements*.

Try it and you will love it!