

Christian Marriage

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(an excerpt from an expository study of 1 Peter)

Introduction

Our culture shapes our thinking and conduct regarding marriage to an incredible degree. A few weeks ago a friend from India, Dr. Theodore Williams of Indian Evangelical Mission, spoke at Community Bible Chapel. On our way to the airport after the service, I asked Dr. Williams about another friend, P. S. Thomas and his family. Dr. Williams told me one of my friend's daughters had just married a young man from Dallas.

I was curious about how this came to pass since the families live so far apart. Theo related that the father of the groom was the pastor of a South Indian church in Dallas. When the time arrived for his son's marriage, they took a week of vacation and flew to India, where they met P. S. and his family and selected one of his daughters for their son's wife.

Imagine! Two young people who had never even met were, within a couple of days, living as husband and wife. And most probably this marriage will last. How different from the American dream of the young girl who meets Mr. Wonderful, falls in love, and then hopes he will propose. The Indian culture sets aside romance until after marriage; the American culture makes romance the prerequisite for marriage. In India, marriage is thought of in terms of marriage and love rather than the American love and marriage.

Culture does play a very significant role in our attitudes and actions regarding marriage. The Christian must not be shaped by his culture, but by the cross of Christ, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul (1 Peter 2:11; see also Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:17-24).

When the Christian comes to marriage then, we

dare not allow the world (our culture) to shape our thinking, our attitudes, or our actions. The purpose of this message is to consider Christian marriage primarily in light of the teaching of Peter in his first epistle.

A Definition of a Christian Marriage

A Christian marriage is one in which at least one partner is a believer in Christ, who embraces the attitudes and actions prescribed by the Scriptures in their relationship with their mate.

We generally think of a Christian marriage as one in which both the husband and the wife are believers in Christ. While this is certainly the ideal, it is not always so. A Christian marriage is one in which Christ is manifested through the marriage relationship by at least one of the partners. Peter's words to wives in 3:1-6 implies that a believing wife may manifest Christ while married to an unbeliever. Who would dare call this marriage something less than Christian?

It is not enough for one who is married to be a Christian. He or she must also think and act in a Christian manner. The Christian's attitudes and actions must flow from the Scriptures. A Christian marriage is not governed by the same principles which guide and govern a secular marriage. The Christian life, including the relationship of marriage, is a supernatural life. A Christian marriage does not just happen naturally; it happens unnaturally, supernaturally, as we obey the Scriptures and individually depend upon the grace of God. Christian marriage is based upon a God-given faith, hope, and love, which only the true believer possesses.

I have often heard Christians say the principles for successful relationships apply as much to unbelievers as they do to believers. If one believes this, then it matters not whether the one who goes to a Christian counselor is a Christian or not; they simply need to be given the right principles. The Scriptures simply do not bear this out. Rather, the Scriptures inform us that when one comes to

Christ, he or she becomes a new creation, old things have passed away and all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17). Peter also speaks of a radical change which takes place when one comes from darkness to light:

13 Therefore, gird your minds for action, keep sober [in spirit,] fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts [which were yours] in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all [your] behavior; 16 because it is written, YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY. 17 And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay [upon earth]; 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, [the blood] of Christ. 20 For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you 21 who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. 22 Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, [that is,] through the living and abiding word of God (1 Peter 1:13-23; see also 4:1-6).

Only a believer can live the way Peter instructs us to live. We can now be holy as God is holy because we are in Christ. We can fix our hope on the glory to be revealed at the return of our Lord because we have trusted in Him for salvation. We can love one another fervently because our souls have been purified in obedience to the truth.

Paul agrees, making it clear that it is impossible for an unbeliever to do those things which the Christian is commanded to do:

5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able [to do so]; 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not

in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you. 12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. 15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, Abba! Father! (Romans 8:5-15).

The unbeliever sets his mind on the things of the flesh, not the things of the Spirit. As an unbeliever, he is hostile toward God and will not subject himself to God. An unbeliever cannot please God because they are only in the flesh. The Christian, however, has the Holy Spirit dwelling within him. The One who raised the dead body of the Lord Jesus to life is the One who can also make us alive to do what God requires.

In theory it is true—if he or she could and would follow biblical principles, the unbeliever would reap the benefits of doing so. The problem is that the unbeliever hates God, hates His commandments and instructions, and because he is ensnared by Satan and his own flesh, he cannot do what is pleasing to God. The biblical principles and commands we are about to enumerate are those which only a Christian can apply, in the power of God, to the glory of God, and to his or her own eternal benefit.

Having set down this preliminary definition of a Christian marriage, we will seek to articulate the values, goals, expectations, priorities and principles which are distinctly Christian.

Biblical Expectations for Marriage

There is no such thing as heaven on earth. Heaven, as it were, will come down to the earth at the return of our Lord (see Revelation 21-22). But the New Testament writers give us no indication that the believer can and will experience heaven on earth. In short, Christ and the apostles speak of suffering now and glory later (Mark 10:29-30; Luke 9:21-26; 24:26; John 15:18-20; 16:33; Acts 14:22; 2 Corinthians 4 and 5; 1 Thessalonians 2:10-16; 3:3; 2 Thes-

salonians 1:3-10; 2 Timothy 1:12; 2:12; 3:12; 4:1-8; James 5:8-11). Peter constantly emphasizes our present suffering and our future hope of glory (1 Peter 1:6-7, 13; 4:12-19; 5:4, 10). Peter's words to citizens (2:13-17), to servants (2:18-25), to wives and husbands (3:1-7) indicate that no matter what our station in life, we will not experience the bliss of heaven until we pass from this life into the glory of Christ's kingdom.

Godliness does not insure marital bliss. Most conservative, evangelical Christians recognize the error of what has been called the health and wealth gospel, name it and claim it Christianity, or the prosperity gospel. We would be especially critical of the prosperity gospel which promises people that God wants them to be rich and all they have to do is to follow a few rules. As this works itself out through the prosperity televangelists, viewers are urged to send in their donations, assured of receiving God's manifold financial blessings in return. We rightly recognize this not only as untrue, but hucksterism at its worst.

We are inconsistent, however. Many who reject one form of the prosperity gospel believe it in another form. For example, how many parents believe that if they raise up their children in accordance with biblically prescribed principles they may be assured of having godly children in the end? How many Christians believe the key to marital happiness is simply to follow the manual? I am afraid we sincerely, but wrongly, assume that following divine principles assures us of experiencing marital bliss. This is simply neither biblical nor true.

For several reasons, we dare not presume that God is obligated to bless our marriage with happiness if we but follow the rules.

First, these presumptions are contrary to the principle of grace. It is a mechanical and legalistic viewpoint which believes that every good we do receives a good in return in this life. The Pharisees held this view and thus believed a person's spirituality was measured by his earthly prosperity and ease. If one were poor, he must be a sinner. If one were sick, he must have done something wrong (see John 9:1-2). Spirituality could be measured by outward evidences of prosperity (see Luke 16:15). If we really believe this, we do not believe in grace. The grace by which we are saved and sanctified, the grace by which we live, does not work this way. Grace is the principle whereby God pours out blessings on men who do not deserve them. We would not want God's blessings to come to us any other way. Mar-

ital bliss is not guaranteed, and most certainly not on the basis of our faithfully following a system of rules or principles.

Second, these presumptions ignore the fact that we live in a fallen world. Marriage existed before sin came upon the human race. It was Satan who attacked mankind through marriage. When God declared the consequences of sin, He did so in terms of marriage (see Genesis 3). We should not expect our marriage to somehow be exempt from the consequences of the fall of man. We should expect sin to adversely affect marriage as it does everything else (see Romans 8:18-25).

Peter therefore assumes that even when a Christian wife lives with an unbelieving husband, there will be suffering (1 Peter 3:1-6). More than this, Peter assumes that when a Christian husband and wife are living together, there will still be sin and suffering (1 Peter 3:7).

Third, living godly may produce an adverse reaction from others rather than a favorable response (see 1 Peter 2:7-12; 4:1-6).

Fourth, suffering is a part of the process by which God proves and purifies our faith, for our good and His glory (1 Peter 1:6-9; 2:18-25; see also Job, Psalm 73; Romans 5:1-11; James 1:2-4).

Our expectations of marriage must not be based on the attitudes and actions God requires of our mate. It is true that the husband should live with his wife according to knowledge, granting her honor as the weaker vessel and as a co-heir of the grace of life (3:7). But it is wrong for the wife to expect or even demand that her husband live this way. She should certainly hope and pray that he will. The requirements God makes of one mate are not found on the check-list of the other. The wife should strive, by God's grace, to fulfill that which God requires of her, just as the husband should endeavor, by God's grace, to be the kind of husband God requires of him. Neither the wife nor the husband should dare make their obedience to God's instructions conditional on their mate fulfilling his or her biblical obligations. Peter's instructions to married couples assume they will not.

A Biblical Goal for Marriage

Our expectations are closely linked with our goals. We set goals for those things we desire, which we believe are attainable. The Christian's ultimate goal should not be to have a good marriage, but to be godly in his or her marriage. A godly marriage is one in which at least one partner exhibits Christ

in the marriage, to the glory of God. The Lord Jesus came as the Suffering Servant and thus became the model for both wives and husbands (as for every other saint). By human standards, our Lord's ministry was not successful. But by divine standards, His sacrifice was not only for the glory of God but for the good of all those who would call upon Him for salvation. A godly marriage displays the excellencies of God to a lost world (1 Peter 2:9), resulting in glory and praise to Him (2:11). It also provides an opportunity for a living witness to the grace and glory of God and the possibility of salvation for those who are lost (3:1). Our goal for marriage should not be the fulfilling of our sensual appetites, but obedience and victory over lust. Our goal should not be happiness, but holiness:

14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts [which were yours] in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all [your] behavior; 16 because it is written, YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY (1 Peter 1:14-16).

Biblical Assumptions and Marriage

We should not assume God is more glorified by a successful and happy marriage than by one fraught with difficulties. As Paul points out in Ephesians 5, a marriage in which the husband and wife play out their respective roles obediently portrays the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church.

Peter's emphasis, however, is somewhat different. Peter's first epistle dealt with the problem of suffering. He taught that when we suffer unjustly and righteously as a citizen, as a slave, or as a husband or wife, we imitate Christ, the Suffering Servant. Christ submitted to earthly authorities at His expense and for our salvation (2:21-25).

It is Satan who believes that men only worship and serve God when they are the recipients of His blessings. He was convinced that when suffering came into their lives, they would deny God (see Job 1:9-11). Peter came to understand that suffering purifies our faith and results in praise and glory and honor to God as well as divine blessing for us (see 1 Peter 1:6-7). Steadfast faith in the midst of suffering glorifies God in a way which is not possible in the midst of prosperity. Job learned this lesson long ago, and Peter later embraced it as well.

We should not assume we are more spiritually blessed by a happy and trouble-free marriage than by one characterized by trials and tribulation. Our ultimate good in this life is not our happiness, but

our holiness (1:15). Suffering often contributes more to our holiness than our happiness does (see 1 Peter 1:6-9; also Romans 5:1-11; 8:1ff.; see also Job and Psalm 73).

The world believes happiness is the good we should pursue, and that suffering is the evil we should seek to avoid. The Christian believes godliness is the good we should pursue, and that earthly suffering is the price we should willingly pay for godliness and future glory.

Biblical Priorities and Marriage

Peter learned from our Lord that marriage is a temporary and temporal relationship, not an eternal union (Matthew 22:30). He also learned that marriage, family, and earthly relationships should be subordinate to our relationship to God (Matthew 10:34-39; Luke 14:25-35). Many in Christian circles teach that while our devotion to Christ may come before our love for family, our family has priority over our ministry. It is indeed difficult to divide between our relationship with God and our service for Him.

The place of our family in our priorities is difficult because of errors at both extremes. Some seem to inundate themselves in ministry to avoid their family responsibilities. These people are really sluggards, not saints. Conversely, some use their family as a pretext for avoiding their spiritual obligations (see Luke 9:57-62). The subtle sin here is that in ostensibly making sacrifices to serve our family we are actually serving ourselves, for our life is tied up with our family. It is not surprising that in those texts in which Jesus called for His disciples to forsake (literally hate) their family as their first priority, He spoke of them giving up their life as well (see Matthew 10:39; Luke 14:26). Our commitment to Christ must come before all other commitments lest our devotion to Him be diminished (see 1 Corinthians 7:25-35).

Peter makes it clear that the eternal and precious takes precedence over the merely temporal (1 Peter 1:7, 13, 18-21, 23-25; 3:7) and that what brings glory to God takes precedence over what seems good to men (see 1:6-7; 2:12; 4:11-16; 5:1,4,10). Happiness is to be subordinate to holiness, and fleshly pleasures are to be subordinate to eternal blessings (1:1:13-16).

Paul speaks to the Corinthians about their preoccupation with fulfilling their personal physical appetites rather than obedience to God. In so doing, he points to the failure of the ancient Israelites (1

Corinthians 9-10). Jesus indicated to Satan that man does not live by bread alone, but rather by obedience to the Word of God (Matthew 4:4). Peter exhorts us to do likewise:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts [which were yours] in your ignorance (1 Peter 1:14).

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul (1 Peter 2:11).

Later, in his second epistle, Peter will warn his readers about those false teachers who will seek to entice them by appealing to their fleshly desires (2 Peter 2:1-22).

Biblical Principles and Marriage

Contrary to many marriage manuals and seminars on marriage, the key to a biblical marriage is not the execution of specialized techniques applicable to marriage alone. Rather, the key to a biblical marriage is the possession of biblical attitudes and actions which apply to all relationships. Immediately after addressing Christian wives (3:1-6) and husbands (3:7), Peter sums up his teaching on submission with these general principles applicable to every human relationship, including marriage:

8 To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; 9 not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing (1 Peter 3:8-9).

Often Christians are told how they can spice up their marriages by employing techniques devised by man. Women are taught to be as seductive as Jezebel, with the assurance that keeping her husband satisfied at home will prevent worry about outside competition for her husband's affection. Far too often, this is at best an element of truth and a massive dose of worldly advice. The advice may be partially sanctified by calling it Christian, but most often it is secular and fleshly at its core. The Christian is not to live in accordance with the wisdom of this world but according to knowledge, the knowledge of God found in His Word.

In Peter's epistle (2:21-25), as in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians (5:21-33), Christ is the model for marriage. Have you ever stopped to think that in the Bible there is no model marriage, no model family? It seems Paul was not married and may never have been married (1 Corinthians 7:8; 9:5-6). We do not even know Peter's wife's name or

how many children they had, if any. No marriage in the Bible could be considered a model marriage for us to strive to imitate. Only Christ serves as the model for marriage, and He was never married. Nevertheless, Christ manifested by His life and sacrificial death the mindset and ministry husbands and wives should have toward each other. He sets the standard, which is perfect obedience to God. He is the example of selfless love and sacrifice for the benefit of His bride, the church. He is the One who is the standard for both the wife (in the same way, 1 Peter 3:1) and the husband (likewise, 3:7). As husbands and wives dwell together, each should live as Christ, surrendering self-interest while seeking the best interest of the other. To follow the example of Christ means we are willing to endure the pain and the penalty which results from the sins of others, with the goal of their salvation. Submission is not just seeking the best interest of another; it is seeking their best interest at our expense.

We make the most of our marriage by not making too much of it. Some people do not take marriage seriously enough; others make too much of it. They mistakenly see it as the solution to all of their problems. Peter does not speak of marriage as the key to earthly happiness. For Peter, marriage is an institution where sin will bring about suffering. But the difficulties marriage introduces into our lives are also the occasion for us to evidence Christ-like attitudes and actions. We, like Christ, can demonstrate submission and steadfast faith in the context of innocent suffering. And in so doing, God may not only use our witness to His glory and to our good, but He may also employ our suffering to bring about the salvation of one who is lost (see 1 Peter 2:24-25; 3:1, 15).

Marriage witnesses to both those on earth (2:9-12) and the angelic observers. When Paul speaks of the conduct of women in the church, he indicates that obedience to his instructions will be observed by the angels (1 Corinthians 11:10). Elsewhere, Paul speaks of the celestial beings learning from what is taking place in the church (Ephesians 3:10). Peter emphasizes the interest with which angelic beings observe the things related to salvation in the church:

10 As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that [would come] to you made careful search and inquiry, 11 seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. 12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in

these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven— things into which angels long to look (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Marriage is an eternal investment—the more you put into it, the more you get out of it from the Lord at His return. Marriage is not about equality, regardless of popular cultural ideas and values on the subject. Marriage is about ministry. Marriage is about submission and servanthood. All too often one partner carefully meters out or measures the things he or she contributes to the other partner, and then very carefully measures what is given back in return. The hope is that what we get back will at least equal or even better, exceed perhaps, what we have put into it.

This principle appears to be wise and proper in monetary investments. But in marriage, it is entirely opposite of the biblical standard. We are to give, and give, and give, with no expectation of receiving from our mate in return. We are to look to God for blessings and rewards, and we are not to expect or demand them in this life. Jesus made it clear that giving with the expectation of returns is neither gracious nor godly:

12 And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. 13 But when you give a reception, invite [the] poor, [the] crippled, [the] lame, [the] blind, 14 and you will be blessed, since they do not have [the means] to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12-14).

The principle our Lord lays down applies to marriage and to every other relationship. We give, not in order to get, but in order to manifest grace. And when we look for rewards, we know they also are a matter of grace and not of works.

Conclusion

I can scarcely communicate how important this message on marriage is to me. It is important because our marriages communicate a message, a message about the Lord Jesus Christ and about His relationship with His church. Marriage is a manifestation of the gospel, lived out day by day by the husband and the wife. When we mess up in our marriages, we mess up the gospel message that others see in our marriage relationship.

Sad though it is to say, many marriages are in se-

rious trouble, and they don't even seem to know it. Christian marriages are dissolving at nearly the same rate as the world in which we live. It is as though the gospel, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God have little power or impact on our marriages. I believe it is because we are seeking to live according to the standard the world has set and the goals it seeks to attain. We are living by the same power the unbeliever draws upon. To have a Christian marriage is to strive for the goals and standards the Bible sets, by the power which God alone provides. It is to cease striving for our own happiness and to endeavor, by His grace, to manifest godliness in our marriages, even when they fall far short of God's ideal, and even when they bring suffering, sadness, and heartache to our lives.

Christian marriage is important because this relationship is indicative of all our relationships. The same principles which guide and govern our marriages guide and govern all our relationships. If we cannot live together with the one we have purposed to love until death parts us, how can we live in peace and harmony with our fellow-believers, or with our neighbors, or our enemies?

Our marriages are but a rehearsal for the great marriage yet to come, our union with the Lord Jesus Christ, enjoying His presence forever:

6 And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. 8 And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright [and] clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. 9 And he said to me, Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, These are true words of God (Revelation 19:6-9).

At His return, our marriage with Christ will be consummated. But for now we maintain a relationship with Him through His Word and through His Spirit. Our communion is through Bible study, worship, and prayer, which makes these essential to our lives. Our earthly marriages are a reflection of our relationship with Christ. Our expectations of God and our expectations of marriage overlap. When we expect nothing but ease, comfort, and pleasure from marriage, that is most likely what we expect from God in this life. When we are angry, frustrated, and out of submission to our mate, our

relationship with God is probably similar. When we worship God and come away wondering what benefit we got from it, we probably have the same attitude toward our marriage.

Submission is an attitude which relates not only to people but to circumstances. When adverse circumstances come our way, this is often the time we strike out against others, our mate, and even God. Biblical submission accepts our circumstances as having come, first and foremost, from the hand of a sovereign and loving God, who causes all things

to work together for [our] good and His glory (Romans 8:28). Submission then seeks to serve, in spite of these difficulties, to the glory of God and the good of others, at the cost of personal sacrifice. We sacrifice our pleasure, our happiness, our interests, looking to God alone to give us what we need even though it may not be what we want.

May God grant to each of us the willingness to be the kind of husband or wife that He wants us to be, to His glory, to the benefit and blessing of our mate and others, and to the salvation of lost sinners.