

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Christian Family Today: Courtship, Marriage and Divorce

It might be argued that, in a society in which relationships are often entered into and broken at frightening speed, that a talk about courtship is no longer relevant. Equally, at a time when it is more common to speak about a partner than a husband or wife, a talk about marriage would seem to have limited appeal. And, as divorce rates soar, should I be talking about how to handle divorce rather than choosing to talk about avoiding it?

My answer, in part, is found in the personal column of my local newspaper. Have you noticed how this column has grown considerably over recent years? It is full of people, from all kinds of backgrounds, seeking loving, stable and lifelong relationships. Why is it that, in a world littered with broken relationships, we still crave for a relationship which so many people's experience seems to suggest is impossible. But it is not impossible! The Bible teaches us that God instituted a pattern of family life which is based upon marriage. In doing so, He also made it possible for a man and a woman to love and to remain faithful to each other all their lives. We hear a lot about this no longer being possible. This morning I want to speak about how it is possible. And, in doing so, I want to emphasise how important it is for Christians to prove this in today's world. The Christian Church should always be an example to the world, not limp apologetically behind it.

Our three subjects are about the marriage relationship.

- **Courtship** - the development of a relationship leading to marriage.
- **Marriage** - the commitment to a lifelong relationship.
- **Divorce** - the end of a marriage.

Courtship

Courtship is a romantic term. But the Bible is not shy about romance and the energy involved in a man winning the love of a woman. The Song of Solomon is one of the greatest love poems written. The sense of value which courtship develops is so important to preparing for marriage. It is during this time that two people begin to love and understand each other. We not only see those things which are attractive but also those things in the person we love which need our help and support. The quality of the relationship which exists prior to marriage will determine the quality of the marriage itself. It is interesting that the Bible begins with a marriage - that of Adam and Eve. Adam, the very first man to get married, gives us a great insight into the events leading up to this event. Adam's courtship was unusual, to say the least, but it is instructive. Why did God not create man and woman at the same time? Adam was prepared for marriage by his relationship with God and the fulfilment of the responsibilities God gave him. Whenever we think about couples getting married, we tend to concentrate upon them knowing each other well enough to have the confidence to take the greatest act of faith people ever demonstrate towards each other. But as Christians, before we enter into such a relationship, it is vital to have a right relationship with God. Adam knew God as Creator, Friend and Guide. God had given Adam responsibility and authority in Eden. It was only after he had experienced this stable relationship with God that he entered into the unique relationship he had with his wife Eve. Knowing God's love and direction in his own life prepared him for his relationship with his wife. It was both a marriage made in heaven and on earth. The woman whom God brought to Adam was right for him and he for her.

Whenever I have the opportunity to discuss marriage with young people, I emphasise the need to have a right relationship with God first. If that relationship is right, it will enable all other relationships to be right. God's love for me helps me to love others. Being in God's family as a child and as a brother or sister teaches about family relationships and how to behave in them. Christ's love for the church teaches me how to love my wife. Christ's self sacrifice teaches me how to give myself to my wife. Christ's forgiveness teaches me how to forgive and be forgiven. The Holy Spirit empowers us to bring love, joy and peace and the other characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit into the relationships we have.

But there are very practical issues in regard to courtship. The basis of our attraction to one another is complex. We are body, soul and spirit. In looking for a future husband or wife we, are looking for someone we can communicate with physically, psychologically and spiritually. This takes time - time to get to know each other and time to learn to love one another. All of us have imperfections. Some of us having striking imperfections! Love has to do with valuing

qualities and being able to overcome weaknesses. We need to complement one another. The only way we will be able to do this is by spending time getting to know each other. Often we have no difficulty doing this before we are married; it is continuing the practice after we are married that is so important.

Sometimes courtship does not lead to marriage. When both people realise this and the relationship is ended amicably and with grace, the feelings, and dignity, of both parties are protected and they can eventually move on. But often one party is deeply hurt. It is so important to be honest in our relationships and far better to end a relationship before marriage than to suffer the greater pain of a broken marriage. Equally, Christians should never use their attractiveness as men or woman to play with the feelings and emotions of others. Untold harm and spiritual damage has been done by careless Christians using a relationship as a convenience until a better one emerges. Such behaviour is a disgrace. Timothy is reminded of the behaviour of Christian young men in 1 Timothy 5:1-2, "Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger as sisters, with all purity." Purity is an important Christian virtue especially in relationships between men and women. We should always respect others and never pretend to commitments we have no intention of keeping.

Pastoral care is vital in situations where ending a relationship has caused deep anxiety and distress. However, even at such painful times we should not allow ourselves to be overcome by self pity and bitterness. We have to come to terms with what has happened and move on. God sometimes allows such circumstances. We can learn from them and become stronger by having passed through such experiences.

There are also some issues which we need to address about being attractive to the opposite sex. We are not all blessed with natural beauty. But we can thank God that we are all capable of having an inner beauty. In our dress and attitudes, we should not invite unwanted attention or put ourselves in situations of moral danger. On the other hand, attractiveness is important. Young Christian men sometimes bemoan their inability to attract young Christian woman when it is obvious to all that a little more attention to dress and personal hygiene would make a remarkable difference! I am reminded of Lord Soper preaching at Hyde Park Corner. He was extolling Christianity when a unkempt and dirty looking man shouted out, "Christianity has been around for 2,000 years and look at the state of the world". Soper replied, "Soap has been around for a lot longer and look at the state of your neck!" Perhaps he could have been more gracious but the logic is indisputable.

Marriage

Happily courtship also leads to marriage. In Hebrews 13:4 we read, "Marriage is honourable". It has never lost that honour in God's sight but men have dishonoured it and the effects are felt in our society. Christian marriage should be prepared for by asking for God's guidance to be led to the right person with whom you will share your life. Do not expect God's blessing on a relationship which is outside of His will. Living together before marriage is not a Christian way of life. It is interesting that more marriages fail when the partners have lived together before marriage than in marriages where this has not happened. The relationships upon which a marriage is formed have to be completely open and based upon genuine love and trust. It is important to have proper help and guidance from spiritual and experienced Christian married couples as part of the preparation for marriage. It cannot be over emphasised how essential it is to approach marriage seriously and carefully.

I like to think of marriage in terms of building a house. A house needs a good foundation. So does marriage, as we have just been thinking about. A house costs a lot of money to build. Building a marriage has significant costs. You need good communications to build a house. Communication is vital to a good marriage. And when the house is built, you can never afford not to maintain it. Marriage is a lifelong investment.

Marriage costs. The Lord Jesus said "It is more blessed to give than to receive" and this is especially true of marriage. These costs are threefold. First there is "me". I have to learn to give myself. "Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it". Then there is "mine". I have to learn to give what I have - my time, my possessions, my energy. "Husbands, love your wives". Finally there is "yours". I have to value another person and put that person first. "How he may please his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:33). But if this is costly, it is also rewarding because my wife has to do the same for me. One flesh does not only mean a sexual union but a total giving of one person to another - a fulfilment of the vows of marriage.

Building is a very complex process and so is building a marriage. The secret is the communications system. First, communicating with God through prayer but also with each other. I have often talked to young married couples about the communication toolbox. In the toolbox are three things: explaining; listening; and responding. We need to explain to each other the things which encourage us and the things which concern us. We also need to listen. Not only to the words that are being said but to recognise the emotions which are often hard to express. Listening can be so beneficial. Think of the times when a friend simply listened to you. Afterwards, the circumstances had not changed but you felt better simply because someone listened. God is the best listener there is. His ear is never closed to us and neither should we be to each other. As well as explaining and listening, communication is about responding. In

marriage, God wants us to learn from Him in all the experiences we pass through as man and wife and respond to the needs we each have. In this way we build up our relationship and we are better able to demonstrate His love and power in our marriages. This is perhaps summed up in the words of Philipians 4:2 "Be of the same mind".

Once a marriage is built the work does not stop. Difficulties will come, accidents will happen and problems will emerge. To deal with these we need the wisdom which is from above, James 3:17. In the Gospels Jesus tells us to watch and pray. Anticipating problems is an important feature of the Christian life. Sometimes problems come unexpectedly, like redundancy. But many problems you can see coming and that is the time to start praying! Anticipate when you can, analyse problems with each other and in God's presence, and seek His answer. Never let problems divide you in marriage but bring you together. Always take action together and support each other even when you are not 100% convinced of the course you have decided to take. Commit your way to the Lord and trust Him to bring it to pass. Never bring recriminations but always share the weight of difficulties.

In the end, we create a valuable marriage. Marriage is worth it! It is God's pattern. Husband and wife, father, mother, children, the larger family - these are the building blocks of society. They are based on these two important investments - Husbands, "love your wives", Ephesians 5:25; and wives, "love their husbands", Titus 2:4.

Throughout the history of civilisation, women have been owned like property and abused. It is only when we come to Christianity that God's model is reaffirmed - a life-long union between one man and one woman. Paul in outlining the qualifications of a bishop in 1 Timothy 3:2 writes, "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife." Today the idea of marriage as a life time commitment of a man to a woman is thought of as being unrealistic. Yet, as we have seen, when marriage fails, people continue to look for this ideal relationship and often remarry. The desire for this God appointed relationship is still widespread.

Christians should always approach marriage under God's direction. For example, God has told us quite clearly that Christians should not be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers". In terms of marriage, this means not marrying someone who is not a Christian. In the East, oxen were the most common animals that were yoked together. For this to work effectively, animals had to be chosen which complemented each other. A bad yoke of oxen was when one pulled one way whilst the other resisted and wanted to go another way. It did not work. And it does not work in marriage. To go against the explicit commandment of God is to put one's Christian life in great difficulty. Love is a very powerful emotion and sometimes leads us to believe we know better than God. That is a great mistake which has proved costly for many Christians who have entered into marriages with unbelievers. Of course, God, in His grace, is always able to overrule. But that should never be an excuse for disobedience.

Some Christians were already married when they trusted Christ and still have husbands or wives who do not share the same faith. This can bring its own pressures and Christians in this situation need prayerful support and understanding. Christian witness in such marriages is very important and care should be taken so that Christian activities and family responsibilities do not come into conflict. A balanced approach needs to be taken.

The basis of Christian marriage is knowing God and knowing each other. This gives us the resources to know how to work things out when trouble comes along. Today we live in a throw away world. We no longer try very hard to repair things. If our television or washing machine breaks down, or our car becomes too unreliable, what do we do? We change them. In today's world, it is often less expensive to change an appliance than to replace a part because labour charges are so high. We talk constantly about consumers. Consumers use up things, then get replacements. This is reflected in our relationships. Relationships often only survive whilst things are going well. When difficulties arise, relationships are abandoned.

Sometime ago I talked about the marriage of Aquila and Priscilla in the New Testament. They lost their home and business and also became refugees. What enabled them to survive these pressures and for their marriage to remain so strong and be such a blessing to others? The resources they had came from the relationship they had with God and it brought strength to their relationship with each other. Trouble did not separate them but brought them nearer to God and to each other. When our marriages are affected by difficulties, how do we handle them? Do we bear them alone until they became unbearable? Do I as a husband fail to see the physical, emotional or spiritual struggles my wife has? Or do I personally take responsibility to understand and help her in such circumstances. Equally, a man needs the same response from his wife in times of stress and difficulty.

It is at times of difficulty that we can begin to think about giving up on our marriages and begin to build up reasons to escape from our marriage vows. Although crises can be blamed for marriage failure, usually unhappiness in a marriage builds up gradually. Crises are often the opportunities to allow the pressures of this unhappiness to explode. I drive up and down the country a great deal covering thousands of miles. One thing I do is ensure my car is regularly serviced. This keeps my car regularly maintained and in good condition and also highlights emerging faults. How often do I sit down with my wife to find out what's troubling her and what makes her happy? How do I surprise her to demonstrate my love? How often do I take some of the workload she finds too much? Christian lives are often

demanding because of our commitments to our families, to work and to the Lord's service. There is the danger that we lose sight of the need we have to "come apart and rest a while". This was the Lord's advice to His disciples in relation to service but it is an equally valid principle in marriage.

The most common problems in marriage are communication, money and sexual relationships. I spoke about communication earlier. When people are in love they talk constantly to each other and want to spend all the time they can together. In marriage, the pressures of life and the demands on our time make this more difficult and love can cool. The challenge is to ensure this does not happen. We do make time for things we want to do - trivial things like watching TV and endless hours on the computer. We have to make time for each other and invest and sacrifice in making our spouse know how important they are to us and how much we love them. The Lord said to the Ephesian church in Revelation 2: "You have left your first love". They had not stopped loving, but the vibrant sacrificing love they once had was longer there. And the Lord felt it. The needs we have in a marriage differ between men and women. That is why understanding those needs is important and communication to do this is vital. Take time to talk.

Money can also be a problem. Not simply the lack of it but how to manage and how not to be obsessed by it. It is important to work together in money matters so that both of you understand the income and the outgoings. You can learn to manage money and if one of you is good with money and other is not, do not allow this to become a flash point but work at getting it right. It is very tempting to say, "Oh, you look after the money". What happens if you lose your wife or husband? Suddenly you have to understand finance. It is better to prepare for that than to cope without the experience. Working it out together is a good way of spending time together and talking about other things. Set time aside.

Sexual relationships can also be a source of difficulty. The joy and excitement of sexual pleasure can diminish and this may cause stress. This is especially so when the sexual drive of the husband or wife diminishes. 1 Corinthians 7:5 we read, "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." Here Paul teaches that there are within a marriage times when, for spiritual reasons, sexual intercourse is sacrificed for a period. But this is not a long-standing or permanent arrangement. A healthy sexual relationship, which is an important part of married life, should continue. To deprive one another of this joy is going to create distress and can lead, in the extreme, to adultery and marriage breakdown. Where genuine difficulties lie at the root of problems with sexual relationships it is important, and no disgrace, to seek help.

Divorce

I have highlighted some reasons for marriage difficulties which can lead to divorce. But should Christians get divorced? It is important to study the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:31 and 32: "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery." Here the Lord makes it clear that there is only one reason for divorce - sexual immorality. He adds to this in Matthew 19 by taking us back to what was in God's mind in the beginning: "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 not man separate."

It is clear to me that, from the beginning, God wanted men and woman to have a lifelong marriage. In marriage, they could enjoy unity on physical, psychological and spiritual levels. When difficulties came, they were to be resolved within the marriage. If they failed each other, there was to be repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. What God had joined together, man was not to separate. It is striking that this kind of marriage is established at the beginning of the Bible. It was the kind of marriage Mary and Joseph had. The first miracle Jesus performs is at a marriage. And Paul, in his last writings to Timothy, emphasises that the testimony of one man having one wife is essential to Christian service. This pattern established by God has now been undermined in our society and we are beginning to see the same dangers amongst Christians. It is vital that we return to God's word if we are to enjoy God's blessing in our marriages.

Several years ago an elderly Christian friend of mine contracted Alzheimer's disease. He was a highly educated and intelligent man. He was also a fine Christian and able Bible teacher. He had been married for many years. His wife cared for him during this distressing illness before he died and once remarked, "We have enjoyed many happy years of marriage together. I am prepared for the sad ones". She not only remembered but fulfilled her lifelong commitment to the husband she loved. Such marriages are a challenge to us all.

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