

Marriage – For Better and Worse • Ephesians 5:21-33

Kingsley Davis, a renowned demographer, author and an authority on marriage and society, writes: “. . . at no time in history, with the possible exception of Imperial Rome, has the institution of marriage been more problematic than it is today.”

America has gone from being the most marrying society in the world to a society where marriage as an institution is in decay. The marriage rate in America is at an all-time low and is dropping. There is a smaller percentage of our population married than at any time in history. Divorces are high—the average American that does get married today faces a statistical probability that 60% of today’s marriages will end in divorce or permanent separation.

Marriage is still one of life’s most important relationships. It is the foundation for family life and child rearing. Overwhelming evidence indicates that children’s futures are directly tied to the marriage of their parents. In a sense, the whole future of America depends on the success or the failure of our marriages.

The challenge is great. The problem is serious, as serious as it was in Imperial Rome in the first century. It was then and there that the Bible’s words from God in Ephesians 5:21-33 were written. The words may sound strange and inappropriate to some of us, out of sync with our culture and values. Well, they sounded equally strange to first century Romans because they were equally out of sync with their culture and values. You see, these are distinctively Christian teachings and distinctively Christian values.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

To approach marriage as one of life’s most important relationships we must choose between current culture and Jesus Christ. Do we view marriage differently as Christians? If so, we must begin with the priority of Christ.

The number one relationship for Christians is Jesus Christ. A Christian is not someone who was baptized or who goes to church. A Christian is someone who acknowledges Jesus Christ as Savior and as Lord and then lives for him. A Christian is someone

who does not put self first. Jesus Christ is first. What Jesus wants and what Jesus says is more important than anything else. Being a Christian transforms everything—the whole order of our lives and relationships are different. On the eternal side, it means that our sins are forgiven and we are guaranteed eternal life in heaven when we die, but on the earth side it means that our lives fully flow out of our relationship with God.

Without Jesus Christ as the controlling person and relationship of life, we are on our own. We can try our best. We can get counseling that

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helps. We can benefit from Christian principles and values. But we can never be truly Christian unless Jesus Christ is first in our lives and every other relationship is subordinate to him.

Making Jesus Christ the priority of our lives is the only way to fully experience Christian marriage that is counter-cultural: “For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; until death—so help us God.” When the priority of Jesus Christ is established for a man and woman the powerful principle of Ephesians 5:21 can be applied to marriage: “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” That means that the way I relate to Charleen and our marriage is most about Jesus Christ and my reverence for him. Every attitude and every action is an expression of the priority of Jesus Christ in my life.

There is no way that this truth can be emphasized too much. If Jesus Christ is number one in a Christian’s life, the worst of marriage circumstances can be lived out Christianly. But if Jesus Christ is not number one in a Christian’s life, even the best of circumstances cannot make a marriage truly Christian.

Let me illustrate this principle from a totally non-marriage example. Recently I visited the national headquarters of a small denomination based in Ohio. The former head of that denomination told me that the leaders of this denomination recognized that the denomination was in serious trouble. Their numbers were shrinking, churches were few and small, finances were dwindling and spirituality was poor.

They hired a church consultant who did extensive site and statistical studies. He met with the leadership and reviewed all of his findings. He told them that the situation was so desperate that the entire denomination was going to go out of business. They were past the point of repair. He couldn’t think of anything to suggest. That was the end of his report. It was time for lunch.

The leaders were surprised and sat in silence as the consultant prepared to walk out. One of them asked, “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

The consultant answered, “The only thing I can think of is that you all get down on your knees, repent of your sins and ask God for mercy.” Then he walked out.

The man who was telling me this story started

to choke up and his eyes welled up with tears. He said those in the room sat there in silence and then one by one got down on their knees and began to pray. They confessed their sins and repented out loud. They asked God for mercy. They admitted they didn’t know what else to do. Without God’s intervention there was no hope.

That was about three years ago. God heard their prayers. Spiritual renewal has spread through their churches. New churches are being started and they are now anticipating that the denomination will double in size in a short period of time.

The principle is clear—the priority of Jesus Christ. The principle applies to every relationship of life, but none more than the relationship between a man and a woman. “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*”

Next is the necessity of commitment. All human relationships face challenges. We all have our weaknesses. What is the glue that not only can hold a relationship together but can make it strong? It is commitment.

Take the relationships between parents and children. They are often severely challenged. Children become desperately ill. Some rebel. They may even hate mom or dad. Occasionally parents break off their relationship with a son or daughter. They may even go to court and disown them, never to see or speak to each other again. But that is exceptionally rare. Most parents stick with their children no matter how sick, no matter how far they stray, no matter how difficult. Parents forgive a thousand times over. They are committed to their children and to the relationship.

It is the same glue that makes marriage relationships strong. Obviously, love and happiness and compatibility are important. But commitment to each other before God is far more important. Marriage is a lifelong relationship that is as much about God as it is about each other. Ephesians 5:31 says, “. . . a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

There is a mystery to this commitment and relationship that only God fully understands. It is a wonderful mystery, much like the commitment and bond between Jesus Christ and Christians. “*This is a profound mystery - - but I am*

talking about Christ and the church.” (Ephesians 5:32)

Robertson McQuilkin is the former president of Columbia International University in Columbia, South Carolina. At age 59 he figured he could effectively lead that university for eight more years. Then his wife Muriel was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. He decided to resign as the university president in order to take care of his wife full-time. He said, “When the time came the decision was firm. It was a matter of integrity. Had I not promised (Muriel) years before, ‘In sickness and in health . . . till death do us part’?”

How wonderfully Christian! How very much like Jesus whose commitment to us is greater than our sickness or our sins against him.

Add to the necessity of commitment the importance of community. For, understand that marriage is much more than two individuals. Marriage is a social relationship that is meant to exist and to flourish in the context of community.

This is a concept that greatly aggravates many modern Americans. It is very common for a man or a woman to say, “My marriage is my business. It has nothing to do with the church, my extended family, children or anybody else.”

They are wrong! Marriage is much bigger than the individuals involved. We acknowledge that with wedding ceremonies and receptions to which family and friends are invited. They are part of marriage as well. The government is involved. The government issues marriage licenses and divorce decrees acknowledging that marriage impacts the whole of our society. When a marriage ends, it is much more than a legal dissolution. God is grieved because he hates divorce. Friends and neighbors have their relationships reordered.

Time Magazine said, “The breakup of families is increasingly seen not only as a personal tragedy but also as a social crisis.” *Time Magazine* reported a study begun in 1970 at the School of Social Welfare at the University of California in Berkeley by Dr. Judith Wallerstein. She tracked 131 children of divorce for over 25 years. She

reported that 18 months after a divorce:

“ . . . we didn’t see a single child who was well-adjusted. And we didn’t see a single child to whom divorce was not the central event of their lives. . . . We realized that the whole trajectory of the child’s life changed. Over half of the (now grown) children I have been studying have psychological problems they attribute to the divorce.”

We must understand that marriage is not something that people do in isolation. Marriage is about community and family and extended relationships. That was once the way it was with extended families and closer community relationships. There were people who encouraged marriages to work and gave advice and support.

Today we must work at community. That is

why church is so important - - belonging to a small group, building couple friendships, serving others who are older and younger. When a marriage needs help it is often too

late to build the relationships that will see it through and make it strong.

This is a reminder to all of us to do everything we can to make marriages succeed. Never enter into an inappropriate relationship with a married person. Affairs are sins against God, against the people involved, but also against marriage, family, children, church, community and society.

Pray for other’s marriages to be good and strong. Take positive actions to help marriages succeed. When couples struggle to stay together and talk about divorce, love and support them but also do everything possible to help them put their marriages back together. Often we seem so supportive of the individual that we appear to endorse the divorce. Let us be community members who fight long and hard to make marriages work.

May our marriages be all that God wants them to be. As Christians let us be counter-cultural— not swept along by the practices of society but

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living with the priority of Jesus Christ, the necessity of commitment and the importance of a community that helps marriages to survive and thrive.

Allow me to pray for your marriage:

God, we know marriage is your design in the first place. It is a relationship that is tenderly close to your heart. Bless, I pray, the marriages of every husband and of every wife. May each man and each woman live whole-heartedly for Jesus Christ.

For those whose marriages are in trouble, may they get down on their knees and repent and ask you for mercy and grace. May the commitment of husbands and wives be stronger every day as they are tested and proved in the heat of trials and difficult circumstances. May they keep their vows to you - - "for better or for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health."

And may your Church be a community that values marriage and does all we can to make marriages strong and good.

God, bless these marriages in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Spirit. Amen.

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