The Curse of Teen Pregnancy

It is not uncommon today to hear news of some celebrity having a child out of wedlock. In fact, illegitimacy seems to be the norm among the famous and infamous these days. The latest blockbuster story is that sixteen-year-old actress Jamie Lynn Spears, younger sister of Hollywood bad girl Britney Spears, is pregnant by her nineteen-year-old boyfriend. The younger Spears stars in Nickelodeon's Zoey 101, in which she plays a clean-cut, sensible character. In real life, she is at this writing twelve weeks pregnant and resolved to have the baby. These days, such a declaration of responsibility is about the best news we can hope for.

Perhaps public acceptance of celebrity promiscuity is at least partly to blame for the United States having the highest teen-pregnancy rate among developed nations. Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control show that, in 2004, nearly 36 percent of live births in America were to unmarried mothers, affecting 1.47 million women. Almost a quarter of these unwed mothers were teenagers. Sadly, a recent national study reported that the birth rate for teens rose in 2006, the first increase since 1991.

The situation is far from improving. In 1970, 10.7 percent of U.S. births were to unwed mothers, meaning that in a little over three decades the illegitimate birth rate has jumped by about 335 percent. The nation has had an illegitimacy rate greater than one-third since 2000. What a shameful moral state we are in!

This is just one facet of the sexual revolution spawned in the 1950s and 60s. We could add high divorce rates, more tolerance for "shacking up," increased incidence of sexual diseases, longer welfare rolls, flagrant prostitution, "mature" television programs and
movies, and a host of other social ills to the list of repercussions to the heavy drumbeat of sexual freedom. As with all of these societal problems, teen pregnancy is not liberating to the too-young mothers that it affects. In reality, teen pregnancy most often dooms a young woman to a lifetime of hardship.

For starters, she is now shackled to a baby who requires nearly continuous care. Though it may be cute and wonderful, the baby needs feeding, changing, comforting, bathing, and entertaining on an around-the-clock basis. Many young moms do their best to finish high school despite the constant demands of the child, and the most successful have devoted, extended families whose members pitch in to help when things get tough. Yet, such "ideal" situations are not usual. For most young mothers, life becomes a struggle.

Attending college is beyond the abilities of most unmarried women with a child. Costs—both monetary and time—are too steep for them to handle. Were the young lady unburdened with a child, she could go to class and work a job or two to get by, but having a dependent to feed, clothe, and send to daycare makes it almost impossible. So college is ditched in favor of getting a full-time job. However, because she has only a high-school education at best, her career opportunities are often limited to starting out at minimum-wage jobs and hoping to receive promotions down the line somewhere through hard work and on-the-job training. Too often, she ends up in a low-wage, dead-end job and relying on government assistance to make up what she lacks.

Socially, she will likely never recover. Chances are, the father of her child will not marry her, and his support for either her or the child (or both) will be minimal, sporadic, and reluctant. Without the benefit of marriage, she can leverage no legal procedures to compel him to help her. Her chances of finding a husband are cut drastically, since few men relish the thought of becoming an instant father to someone else's child once he says, "I do." Many unwed mothers will at some point live unmarried with a man, and studies show that, while this situation can be economically better than living alone, it falls far short of providing the real benefits that marriage does (see "Unwed mothers' prospects for marrying well, or at all, are greatly diminished, Cornell study finds").

Finally, what about her mental and emotional state? A September 1999 report, "The Age of Unwed Mothers: Is Teen Pregnancy the Problem?" by the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values points out a link between unmarried mothers and depression:

One nationally representative study finds that, among White 18 and 19 year olds, about 41 percent of unmarried, first-time mothers reported many
symptoms of depression, compared to 28 percent of married, primiparous [first-time] mothers of that age [Source: "Young Maternal Age and Depressive Symptoms: Results from the 1988 National Maternal and Infant Health Survey," American Journal of Public Health 88, no. 2 (February 1998): 266ff]. Maternal depression is a significant risk factor for children, often leading to problems in adjustment that may linger for years after the mother's recovery.

From every angle, the unmarried mother's life is a battle against the odds. She pits her and her child's life and welfare against the cold, brutal forces of this world, and the hard reality is that this uncaring world grinds them down most of the time. Most unwed mothers do not have the resources Jamie Lynn Spears—or any promiscuous celebrity, for that matter—hasto avert the hardships inherent in the curse of breaking God's law regarding premarital sex.

There is a great deal of love behind the words, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14), a command that includes all forms of sexual immorality. God does not want to see any young woman have to suffer the adversities single-motherhood can bring crashing down on herself through sin. The best course to take is the old-fashioned, tried-and-true path of wisdom: to abstain from sexual relations until marriage. As many who have done so will testify, it significantly improves the quality of life!

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

Dating Outside the Church
by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Richard Ritenbaugh warns that dating outside the church is fraught with obstacles and potential dangers, yoking a believer with an unbeliever and exponentially complicating the spiritual overcoming and growth process, exposing one to perdition or providing a grievous cross to bear. It is impossible to have the best of both worlds (the world and God's way). As in the physical plane, yoking together unlike creatures destroys harmony and productivity. Two can't walk together unless they have the same beliefs and goals. Paradoxically, the scattered condition of the church, when properly evaluated, actually may improve prospects for an appropriate mate.
From the Archives: Featured Article

Procreative Madness: The Price Our Offspring Pay for Lawlessness
by Charles Whitaker

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