

The Sacredness Of Marriage

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How many more years do we have before the return of Christ? Let none of us deceive ourselves: The time of God's wrath upon this world is drawing closer with each passing day. Even with our limited view of the world, we can see America's social fabric—the traditional lifestyle that takes God into consideration—being turned upside down.

A clear example of this is marriage and its sacredness. The old values are swiftly being replaced by the new, and the new does not look very good.

Psalm 94:20 asks, concerning God's involvement with worldly governments who decree laws that shape our social fabric: "Shall the throne of iniquity, which devises evil by law, have fellowship with You?" Of course, we know the answer. God cannot abide iniquity.

In the state of California, Proposition 8, a ballot initiative declaring marriage to be only between a man and a woman, recently passed. Just before the election, polls showed that a majority of voters did not favor it, yet those polls proved wrong by a margin of 4.6 percent. However, in two other states—Massachusetts and Connecticut—the institution of marriage is no longer considered a sacred covenant between a man and a woman and God, but merely a contract between any two persons wanting legal rights. These states sanction homosexuality, throwing a legal covering over it and calling it a "marriage" to hide its wickedness.

In no way has God been caught off-guard on this, yet we can be sure that He is disgusted with it. Not only does He condemn homosexuality in His Word, but He also created and blessed the institution of marriage to be a sacred bond between a man and a woman. To see it unravel is a sure sign of the decay of our culture.

God Institutes Marriage

In an old *World Tomorrow* telecast, Herbert Armstrong commented that he did not need newspapers to show him where things are headed. The Bible, he declared, is just as current as today's headlines, foretelling future events as if they were written today. A portion of Paul's letter to the Romans is just such an example. The apostle's words in Romans 1:18-32 are playing out openly in our daily news as marriage loses its traditional value in this society.

In this passage, Paul describes the current generation—how men have rejected God's will and supplanted it with gross idolatry and how they have become lovers of themselves, exalting the creation and their desires above the Creator. With this foundation and with God allowing mankind to pursue its own course for the present, human nature desires to remake all of God's institutions in its own image, and the marriage covenant is in its cross-hairs:

Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the

natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:24-32)

Marriage and family are the foundations of any healthy society, and these two bedrocks of civilization are slowly being dismantled before our eyes. When these foundations, which God formed in righteousness, are weakened further, it will prepare for a different foundation—one formed in unrighteousness to support the coming of the lawless one, the son of perdition, as II Thessalonians 2: 3-10 foretells.

Marriage and family were undefiled when God gave them as a gift to mankind before sin entered the world. In Genesis 2:18, God enacted the first social foundation for mankind: "And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.'" Then, in verse 24, God sanctifies Adam's relationship with Eve by declaring that the two would be joined together as one flesh, that a man and his wife should leave mother and father, cling to each other, and become their own family unit. In other words, marriage was dignified and defined by God as a joining of one man and one woman.

Why did God do it this way? He could have just kept on creating one man after another to populate the earth. It was unlikely that He would run out of the dust of the earth. However, He made them male and female for a reason.

God Wants Children!

Malachi reveals a major reason why God created man and woman to become one flesh. The answer is part of God's castigation of Judah for tolerating easy divorce laws. In Malachi 2:11, He says that by doing so, the Jews had profaned the holy institution of marriage that God so dearly loves.

Yet you say, "For what reason [are you angry]?" Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. "For the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence," says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 2:14-16)

Because He wants godly children, God made humans male and female. Within the structure of a proper, married family life, strong in unity and free from worries of separation, it would produce the best results.

From this comes a second reason why God made them male and female. With the blessing of children, God has bestowed on mankind the gift of allowing parents to become His partners in His creative works by rearing children who are prepared to answer His calling. This spiritual reproductive process will one day bring many sons and daughters into God's Family. This realization places families and marriage far above what most in the world consider them to be. It elevates them to a moral level unrecognizable in this world of sin.

The wisdom and depths of love that God has for mankind are beyond our abilities to know fully, but it is clear that marriage and family are prominent in God's plan. Any changes to the divine structure are an affront to God and His plan. Marriage is of divine origin, and changes to it are nothing less than man's rebellion against his Creator.

Christ's instruction in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:27-32 is exactly what He gave to His servant Moses for Israel. Both teach us that marriage is permanent, its ties so binding that they can be broken only by death—or something worse: physical infidelity, moral abandonment, or sustained abuse by either spouse, all of which Jesus encapsulates in the term *porneia*, translated as "sexual immorality."

The Pharisees tested our Lord on this point, but His response leaves no doubt on how binding the institution of marriage should be, a standard set from creation:

And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, '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." (Matthew 19:4-6)

Because marriage is a creation of God, it possesses a sacredness that no man-devised institution can ever have. This world is trying to exchange the sanctity of marriage for its complete opposite, the profane, but this secular approach will never produce a healthy society.

Spiritual Implications

For God's people, marriage carries an even greater significance. God has elevated marriage beyond its original human purpose by using it as a symbol for the relationship between Christ and His church, which He signified in His relationship with the nation of Israel. In both the Old and New Testaments, Christ is represented as the Husband or Bridegroom, and the church, or Israel as its type, as either His wife or bride. The importance of marriage to God's spiritual purposes cannot be understated.

In the Old Testament, Ezekiel 16:8-14, Jeremiah 31:1-4, and Isaiah 54:5 show God as Husband to ancient Israel. In the New Testament, Paul writes in II Corinthians 11:2, "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." All of us look forward to the day when Christ comes to collect His bride, so we should be using our time wisely in preparation for it.

When my daughter was preparing for her wedding, she worked so hard on many different things. She spent many hours in sending invitations, planning meals, hiring a photographer, and choosing

clothing, silverware and dishes, cake, music—the list seemed endless. Her work in making these arrangements involved the whole family.

Can those who are preparing to be Christ's bride be any less busy? If this marriage is important to Him, it must be of great significance to each of us.

Consider this: Our baptism into the body of Christ means much more than being a part of His physical church. It is just as much a betrothal of marriage—and holds for us just as much intimacy in the relationship—as any betrothal between a man and a woman.

In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul draws a word picture showing the parallel between a married couple and Christ and His church, setting out the proper order for success, not only for physical marriage, but for our spiritual one too. Both the physical and the spiritual are rooted in the love God has for the marriage covenant. Just as a man and a woman are joined as one flesh, so too are Christ and His church joined in one Spirit.

Those in the world who ridicule the institution of marriage and declare it old-fashioned and unnecessary for modern society, who work to pass lax divorce laws and consider the binding claims of marriage to be trivial things that can be put aside, are workers of iniquity. Proper marriage and family values are the bedrock of all successful societies, and when these are torn down or even entered into lightly, a nation's self-destruction cannot be far away.

Rome fell, not because great armies came against her, but because her marriage and family values were undermined as divorce and deviant sexual practices became common. Her sure foundation was broken. America is swiftly following in her footsteps with so many marriages today ending in divorce, tearing families apart. As long as people refuse to comply with God's laws concerning marriage, the trend toward national ruin will continue.

The Commandments and Marriage

No less than three of the Ten Commandments—the fifth, seventh, and tenth—directly involve strengthening marriages and families and preserving their unity and sacredness. Of course, all of God's commands, if followed, will work to strengthen man's relationship with God and fellow man, but these three are aimed directly at securing these sacred bonds. When considering any of God's commands, we find that they are broad in scope and ordained, not just to regulate our physical relationships, but also our spiritual one with Christ.

The fifth commandment speaks directly to parents and children, laying the foundation of responsibility that each has to the other. When children submit to their parents, and parents provide a loving environment to nurture their children in lawful living, the children and society directly benefit from this command. Home government is the cornerstone of national government, and when the home is right, the social structure follows. When marriage and family unity are held in high esteem and a fear of violating God's standards is instilled, sin can be held in check. Hebrews 12:11 declares, "Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

The seventh commandment—forbidding adultery, unfaithfulness by either spouse—stands against anyone who would defile the sanctity of the marriage covenant through sexual sins. Adultery is probably the most dishonest act against the binding contract of the marriage relationship; it is a

betrayal of a most sacred trust. Not only is it a sin against one's companion, but as Paul teaches in I Corinthians 6:18, it is a sin against one's own flesh. It has destroyed many marriages and families. A marriage can stand against many adversities from without, but this sin destroys it from within, and few, if any, marriages can truly recover from such infidelity.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:28 that adultery begins in the heart. It is more than an outward action, but a lust that comes from within. Christ teaches us how broad the law is, and sexual acts outside of the marriage covenant—even just the desire for them—breaks this command. In other words, if the desire is there, yet only lack of opportunity has kept a person from this sin, the law has still been broken.

The tenth commandment—"You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Deuteronomy 5:21)—is likely a precursor for warnings against many other sins. It defends against anyone who would come between a man and his wife, and like the seventh, its breaking also begins in the heart. Unlike the seventh commandment, which looks to protect the marriage from within, in the tenth commandment God protects it from without.

Strong marriages can stand up to outside pressures of this sort, but weak marriages that are battling other issues may not. How many marriages have been defiled or destroyed by the coveting of another cannot be known, but since God included it in the Ten Commandments, its potential harm against the sacred bond of marriage must be high.

When he coveted Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, King David assaulted the marriage covenant, and disaster soon followed. Breaking this commandment led to adultery and then to murder. In our society today, similar lusts are leaving destroyed families in their wake.

God's Word contains a great deal about marriage and the esteem He holds for it. From Adam's marriage to Eve in Genesis 2 to Christ's marriage to the church in Revelation 19, its importance in God's creative purpose and plan rings clear. Hebrews 13:4 teaches that marriage is to be honored by all and kept undefiled. Since we have been called out of this world, we can be certain that, to some degree, we have not kept God's standards as well as we should have. As this world degrades its care for the institution of marriage—and the times more closely resemble the days of Noah—each of us needs to hold tightly to the sacred values of marriage.