

GUIDANCE ABOUT MARRIAGE

There is confusion over most issues that really matter. Pressures from many different sources try to get us to behave one way or another. Questions regarding marriage and the relationships and behavior associated with marriage have produced profound confusion in our day. Nearly 50% of the marriages in our nation end in divorce. It is not unusual to know people that have been married several times or to know couples that are not married who are living together. Part of the confusion is a result of so much conflicting advice that is available to people. Everybody is ready to give advice to others about marriage. If you happen to watch Donahue, or Oprah, or read Dear Abby you can hear a variety of "what to do" advice. There are professional marriage counselors and you can get advice from lawyers and ministers. Books and manuals have been written and many of them give completely different directions for a person to take. Do all these advisers and their advice really matter as compared to what the Word of God says? You may find yourself in a position to give advice about marriage to someone else. Do we know what the Bible says or would we have to rely on what the latest guest on Oprah said on the subject? Paul addressed some issues about marriage in one of his letters to the Church at Corinth.

Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. (1 Corinthians 7:1-2)

Apparently there were some in the Church at Corinth that were advocating that Christians should not engage in sexual relations. It would seem that they had a slogan that said, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." Correcting the error of this slogan gave Paul an opportunity to give them some much needed teaching on the subject of marriage from a Christian perspective. Paul countered this slogan with the practical consideration of the immorality that is in the world. People see the immorality and that stimulates the natural sexual drive people have. Because of this Paul concluded that it is good for each man to have his own wife and each woman to have her own husband. Now, within the context of the marriage, Paul gives guidelines for conjugal behavior.

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. (1 Corinthians 7:3-6)

Apparently, those that advocated abstinence from sexual relationship were pressuring other married couples to follow abstinence, also. Paul discouraged the practice of abstinence. The proper attitude for the individuals in a marriage relationship is to be willing to consider the needs of their partner in marriage. You can see TV shows or movies where the wife refuses to have sex with her husband in an effort to get him to change his mind about something. Paul would call this defrauding or cheating the husband. Paul does say that if both the husband and wife decide to abstain for awhile for some good reason, then that is OK. Paul cautioned them to be reasonable in this because there may be problems of self control. Paul was careful in not putting forth what he was saying as a inflexible commandment, but as a concession or as a permissible and reasonable way to approach this sensitive subject.

What about singleness? Not everyone was married. In fact, Paul was not married. He commented on that.

I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. 1 Corinthians 7:7-9

Paul considered "singleness" as a gift from God. He realized that not everyone had the same gift. The gift that Paul mentioned might have been that of self control. Paul's advice to those that were not married at that time was to do what was best for them considering their own makeup. It is good to stay unmarried or it is good to marry. There is not a set of rules into which everyone must fit. If a person does not have the gift of self-control or singleness, then it is good to marry. The alternative is to be constantly distracted by passions that are unfulfilled.

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. (1Corinthians 7:10-11)

Previously, Paul had been giving Godly advice and options regarding sexual relationships within a marriage and whether or not to get married. Now, as he addressed the issue of Christians that are married, the advice turns into commandments and not just from Paul but from the Lord. Christian marriage is a serious commitment that is not to be taken lightly. The specific problem Paul was addressing here may have related to the abstinence question that he had just written about. Those that taught abstinence may have influenced wives to move away from their husbands or husbands to send their wives away so that they would not break the abstinence rules. The teaching can and should apply to the general question of separation and divorce. The answer is that we are NOT to do that.

Separations and divorces do happen among Christians and Paul recognized that fact. What is to be the course of action if a separation and divorce occurs? The word is to remain unmarried or be reconciled to their marriage partner. There is a lot of controversy about what the Bible teaches on this subject and many are concerned. The thing for us to do in dealing with persons who have been victimized by divorce is to realize that they need compassion and help in putting their lives back together. They don't need condemnation from us, they have enough of that already from themselves.

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:12-16)

What happens when you have a marriage in which only one of the partners is a Christian? The same rules do not apply. Even though God's ideal for marriage is still valid, Paul realizes that the nonbeliever is not going to be influenced by what God thinks or says. The choice of what happens to the marriage is really up to the non-Christian. If the non-Christian partner wants the marriage to stay intact, then the Christian partner should work toward that end. The Christian should have no problem with this option. On the other hand, if the non-Christian partner wants to withdraw from a marriage, then the Christian partner should not stand in the way. In such a situation, the Christian should not be under any bondage to remain unmarried.

The argument for keeping such a marriage together is that the Godly influence of the Christian partner has a good possibility of helping the other partner to be saved. It should also have a lot of influence on the children of such a marriage.

I think that is great that the Kingdom of God has places for the person that chooses to be single or those that choose to be married. I'm glad that God has given to us guideline and rules that show us what He expects for those that enter the covenant of marriage. I'm also glad to know that God allows marriages made up of Christians and non-Christians to function and can use such marriages as a means to bring about the salvation of the lost.