

## Ethics and Marriage

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We live in a world that seems to have no concern for ethics and morals in any phase of life. Just when I think I have heard it all or that things could not get worse, I find I am wrong again! It used to be that we were not surprised when a young couple decided to “live” together rather than marry. Now it seems this trend has caught on among the more mature citizens. In the July/August 2000 issue of the Modern Maturity magazine we read, “Unmarried opposite-sex couples 65 and older rose 73 percent from 1990 to 1999, according to the U. S. Census Bureau. Obviously, shacking up isn’t just a dollar decision. Some couples have soured on marriage. Others have seen their kids cohabit so they’re comfortable with it.” (11) In such cases, as well as other attitudes concerning marriage, ethics and morals have been tossed out the window.

Ethics is defined by Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary as “...a set of moral principles and values; a theory or system of moral values...” (392). Many souls will spend an eternity in damnation because they failed to recognize that God has rules and regulations for marriage. Just as in any realm of life men have sought to circumvent the clear teachings found in God’s word (Revelation 22:18-19). Ethics play a great role in the health and stability of the marriage. Without observing the laws set in place by God men cannot find happiness in the home and it will not be as God intended. Men have tried in vain to live by their own laws and by their own morality. Jeremiah the prophet said in the long ago; “I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). While the Proverbs writer said; “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Proverbs 16:25). With those verses in mind let us now observe the ethics that are to be a part of a godly marriage.

### FROM THE BEGINNING

After God had made man (Genesis 2:7), He saw the need for a suitable helper (Genesis 2:18) and so He made Eve who would be Adam’s wife. At the same time God gave the law regulating the bonds of matrimony (Genesis 2:24). He made one woman, for one man, for life. The couple then violated God’s commandment concerning the tree in the midst of the garden (Genesis 3:3) and sin was introduced into the world. Not long after this, men began violating the ethics set in place to govern the home. In Genesis 4:19 we read of Lamech taking two wives and things have not been the same since. From the beginning God has had a law in place for all men relative to the home and marriage. As we observe some of the ethics of marriage let us keep in mind, these are God’s ways and these Bible principles must be observed so as to make the marriage happy and successful. When these statutes are set aside, the home will suffer and it cannot be what God intends for the home and

marriage to be. The ethics and morals found in our homes play a great part in the success of our nation as well.

## **MARRIAGE DEFINED**

The very definition of marriage has been twisted to accommodate the situational ethics of our times. Marriage is commonly defined as the social institution under which a man and a woman establish their decision to live as husband and wife by legal commitments, religious ceremonies and customs according to the laws under which one lives. Marriage is not simply “living together” as some like to say. Marriage is more than a convenience for people to use in pursuit of selfish goals. I had one young woman ask if hers was a binding marriage since she married only to help a friend get legal citizenship papers. I have heard of other cases as well, even from some in the church. Surely we can see the fallacy of such reasoning. When eligible couples (we will discuss who is eligible in the next section) go through the due process required by the legal statutes of the state in which they will be married and are pronounced husband and wife - they are married! Even in most states where so called “common-law” marriages are recognized, the unions are legally binding. According to Arlynn Nellhaus in the Denver Post, February 7, 1972, all couples who have entered into such agreements cannot separate and take on another partner without being guilty of bigamy. They must go through courts to get a divorce before they can take other mates.

We have some who believe and teach that it is the sexual union which joins the man and woman in marriage. The sexual relation is a God given privilege of married partners, which one partner must not withhold from the other (1 Corinthians 7:1-5). If the sexual relationship is required as a prerequisite for marriage, we would have the parents of our Lord living as husband and wife before they were actually married. An angel told Joseph to “fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife” (Matthew 1:20). Joseph obeyed in verse 24 and “took unto him his wife.” Now notice verse 25; “And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.” Joseph took Mary to be his wife BEFORE he knew her in a sexual way. Therefore, we can clearly see that the sexual union is not what unites a couple in marriage.

## **MARRIAGE IS FOR THOSE WHO ARE ELIGIBLE**

Every married person must meet the eligibility requirements set forth in God’s word. There are those, who in God’s sight, have the right to enter into the marriage relationship and those who are not eligible to be married. The New Testament teaches clearly that there are only three classes of people who may ethically enter into the marriage bond:

- (1) Those who have never been married and are marrying one who is also scripturally eligible for marriage (Genesis 1:18-24; Matthew 19:5-6);
- (2) Those whose companion has died (Romans 7:1-4), assuming again that the marriage is to someone who is scripturally eligible; and
- (3) Those who have put away their marriage partner due to fornication on the part of the companion who is guilty of sexual unfaithfulness (Matthew 19:9).

Furthermore, when we look at current trends in parts of our country we must emphasize that there is no such thing as a homosexual marriage. God did not sanction this filthiness in any walk of life, much less in the divine institution of marriage. A scriptural marriage is based upon a love that is to be held in high esteem between a man and a woman! God “made them male and female” and anything else is an abomination (Genesis 1:27-28; Ephesians 5:28-31; Romans 1:26-27).

### **MARRIAGE IS TO BE LIFE LONG**

Today people enter into this God ordained relationship with no thought of it lasting for a lifetime. Thus, most do not last until the ink dries on the marriage licence. God said; “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6). To put asunder what God joined is a violation of the law set in place by His inspired word.

Christians, as well as non-Christians, are subject to the same marriage law. God did not intend for there to be separate standards by which men are to live. There is not a different set of ethics for the child of God and the alien sinner. Matthew 19:3-12 clearly deals with both classes of people, the believer as well as those who did not believe.

### **MARRIAGE REQUIRES THAT THE VOWS BE HONORED**

Marriage is to have the quality of absolute fidelity. We learn from God's faithfulness as a bridegroom what real fidelity means. Paul compares marriage to the relationship of Christ to His church (Ephesians 5:32). Christ, the bridegroom was faithfully committed to His bride, the church and gave Himself for her (Ephesians 5:25). Faithfulness and fidelity are fundamentals for a successful marriage. Christ should be our example in honoring our marriage partners and the vows that were made.

The vows entered into at the marriage ceremony are binding. They are pronounced before God and before men. To break the vows to ones mate is a violation of trust, honesty, and faithfulness. Violating these vows will break the heart of a loving companion. It will destroy the hope and lives of little children. We must also note that to break the vows to our mate is to break the vows made to God. Since God intended that the marriage be a permanent bond, we must never forget that we are accountable to Him and His law relative to the vows made. The vows taken at marriage are simply promises we make and vow to keep. “I promise to keep myself unto thee only, so long as we both shall live” is a familiar statement repeated in many marriage ceremonies. It is a violation of Biblical ethics when these promises are not honored. Hebrews 13:4 states that “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.” Marriage is honorable when men honor the marriage.

Keep in mind that God's law is the basis for ethics in all of our lives. In Matthew 19:4-6 Jesus said; “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

## **EACH PERSON IN A MARRIAGE HAS GOD GIVEN RESPONSIBILITIES**

Ethical considerations extend even into the responsibilities which are given to each partner in a marriage. God has given a specific plan for husbands and wives in their marriage relationship. Ephesians 5:22-33 gives a clear and distinct picture of these roles.

Wives are told to “submit yourselves unto your own husbands” (Ephesians 5: 22). The world has put a bad connotation on the idea of wives being in submission to their husbands. The word submit in the original language is a compound word meaning to be under obedience. Grammatically it is present, middle, meaning a continual self-produced action. Notice Paul says; “submit yourselves.” It has nothing to do with the greater or lesser in regard to worth. It has to do with the wife recognizing God’s role for the man as the head (Ephesians 5:23) and voluntary, willingly placing herself under his headship recognizing that this is God’s plan for the home.

The husband has responsibilities as well. There are two words used in these verses relating to the husband’s treatment of his wife. The word “head” is used to illustrate the order of responsibility in the home. The husband is to lead in the home (Colossians 3:18) and guide the family with Christian character. The word “love” is also used in this passage and it is the Greek word *agape* (love), which means to act in the manner which is best for the object of our love. When husbands love in this manner, it will not be hard for godly women to “submit.” Notice the illustration; “even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” In addition to the necessity of love in the marriage, husbands have a moral and ethical responsibility to provide for their families (1 Timothy 5:8). Many men today will not work and leave their families without the necessities of life. Many are on welfare because the husband and father will not work. God intends for men to work (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; Genesis 3:19). It is not ethically correct to shirk our God given responsibilities.

## **COHABITATION WITHOUT MARRIAGE IS UNETHICAL**

We will conclude this material as we began by referring to the July/August 2000 AARP magazine article which really demonstrates the deplorable condition of ethics in America. Many young couples have lived in the sinful situation of cohabitation, choosing to live together as husband and wife without the “strings” being attached. The article states; “The new wedding vow: Let’s stay single. Three months after their first date, widowers Shirley Schoener and Ed Poole, then 69 and 77, were talking about marriage. But Shirley got cold feet. She was afraid she’d lose her late husband’s benefits if she walked down the aisle, so the New York City couple moved in together. Marriage just didn’t seem practical, says Shirley.” This is a clear example of situational ethics. The situation in which they found themselves seemed to be resolved in just living together. Sin never will resolve a problem (1 John 4:4-8).

## **CONCLUSION**

We have only touched the hem of the garment in this material. God placed obligation and restrictions in the institution of marriage. Men have tried in vain to change what God intended. But try as they may, His word still reigns supreme. His word is the last word on all religious matters. Marriage is ordained

of God and He has set in place the laws which govern it. Malachi 2:15-16 gives a summation to the need for ethics in the marriage. By inspiration Malachi said; "Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously." The relationship between a husband and wife will stand the test of time if, and only if ethical matters are learned and adhered to by both parties. The world view will be kept out of the marriage when proper ethics are practiced (1 John 2:15-17).

### WORKS CITED

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