

“Why Marry?”
Matthew 19:1-12
May 4, 2008
Rev. Curtis J. Young

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When it comes to marriage there are so many good reasons -- to just avoid it.

Jesus never married. Do you think it was because he was deficient in some way? Or lacked the maturity necessary for a long term commitment?

As far as we know Jesus never commented on his own choice to remain single. Maybe it wasn't a big deal for him. If it was not part of his own core identity, maybe we shouldn't make it part of our core definition of people.

Still, the fact Jesus did not marry speaks to us. It has spiritual implications. It was left to Paul in I Corinthians 7 to flesh them out, not in reference to Jesus but in reference to himself. For Paul also was single.

He not only was unmarried but urged other believers to follow his example, for the sake of single minded, singlehearted devotion to Christ. He wrote in I Corinthians 7: 35: “And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction.” (NKJV)

Echoing Jesus' theme that there is no marriage in heaven, Paul underscored marriage is not part of eternity but part of this world, and this world is passing away. He wrote:

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none...For this world in its present form is passing away. (I Corinthians 7:29)

Though he urged others to follow his example, Paul conceded that marriage is the better alternative to relentless desire; of the two choices, marriage is the one that is not sinful

But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (I Corinthians 7: 2, 9)

This is hardly an unqualified endorsement: “Don't miss out, get married!” In fact when it came to widows remaining single, he wrote, “In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is...”

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Why did Paul write this way? He wrote: “Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are...But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.” (I Corinthians 7:26, 28)

Troubles. There’s a reason to avoid marriage. Many just happen: Disease, illness, injury, death, a poor economy, natural disasters to name six. Others are self-inflicted: Selfishness, pride stubbornness, in-laws, poor communication, infidelity.

Socrates taught: “By all means marry. If you get a good wife, you’ll become happy. If you get a bad one, you’ll become a philosopher.” It would be interesting to know what Mrs. Socrates thought!

If there are so many reasons – spiritually minded and otherwise -- to avoid marriage, why marry at all? Let’s think about some answers that are rooted in the history of the church.

In the Christian Church of the second century, bearing children was strongly endorsed as justification for marriage, but conceiving them was not. Influenced by the Greek assumption that whatever is material is inferior and tainted compared with whatever is purely spiritual (separated from the physical) is worthy of God, the Church only tolerated marital relations.

By the middle ages the Church barely tolerated them, and only for the purpose of children. It was a sin to have marital relations for the sake of pleasure. The Church forbade relations on Sundays to honor the resurrection, on Wednesdays to recall the beginning of Lent, on Fridays to remember the crucifixion, and the evening before a feast day.

It forbade relations at any time during pregnancy, thirty days after the birth of a male, and forty days after the birth of a female. It forbade relations five days before communion, during the forty days of Lent, for eight days after Easter, eight days before Pentecost, and forty days before Christmas. Talk about counting down the days until Christmas!

The Protestant Reformation led to the recovery of Biblical truth in many areas including marriage. Not only was marriage for seeding the world with godly children and guarding against sexual sin, but for the mutual comfort of husband and wife.

Mutual comfort was the Protestant response to Catholicism’s insistence that marriage is a sacrament, commanded by God as a means through which God communicates grace we must have to merit salvation.

If you read the Puritans you know that the emphasis on mutual comfort very much included the marriage bed. The Reformation served to restore humaneness to the church’s understanding and the doctrine of God’s creation in the goodness marital relations.

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What could be wrong with that? There is something wrong. For all its flaws the Roman Catholic view of marriage was God-centered. Christian marriage, marriage as Jesus presented it to his disciples is thoroughly God-centered. First and foremost, marriage occurs in relation to God – not the husband, not the wife, not the couple. God joins his children together.

Ask people why they are getting married today, and an answer related to the bearing of children is a distant second. An answer related to the curbing of sexual sin is a very distant third. Most often the answer relates to mutual comfort, to love and be loved exclusively by one other, as if love is sufficient motivation. And God is asked to bless it.

This is expressed in different ways:

“We’re in love, and I can’t imagine spending my life with anyone else or being happy without him.” What does this reveal? Never ending love? No, a lack of imagination.

“We share the same values, want the same things and get along so well. We took a computer test. It said we’re completely compatible. We’re both smart. We’re both athletic. We both love children. We both love the out of doors. We both work hard. We both like country music.

Besides having poor taste in music, what does this show? You’re perfect for each other? Are so many things in common a guarantee of wedded bliss? What about the things people have in common that don’t get tested: Selfishness, lust, pride, greed, stubbornness?

If there were a test that truly predicts a long and happy marriage, everyone would take it. If there were a test that truly revealed the extent to which sin has affected the human heart, no one would.

I am not saying that love is a poor motivation for marrying. It is insufficient. We know it is insufficient because most marriages motivated by mutual love do not hold up. They fall apart completely or they break down until held together by some thin thread of expediency.

If the pain and bitterness of broken marriage were fumes awaiting a match, the whole world would be on fire.

The motivation of love is not sufficient because it is man-centered. Because it is man-centered, it inevitably becomes self-centered.

This last week John Stratford went to be with the Lord. I spoke to Fran. Through her tears this is how she told me he had died, “Curt, the honeymoon is over.” They had been married 68 years.

I am not trying to dash dreams here. I think everyone desires to find the love of a lifetime. The love of a lifetime isn’t someone you find. The love of a lifetime is someone you become for another over the course of decades.

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As much as marriage is a commitment you make to another person, it is a commitment you make to yourself, and it is a commitment you make to God.

But marriage, as Jesus taught his disciples, is more than a personal commitment, more than man-centered. It is a holy calling. It is a sacred vocation for the sake of the Kingdom of God. To be married is to be engaged in a holy work.

Everything about marriage is holy, from outside in, from the sexual union to the spiritual union. Marriage is kingdom work. That is why is better to avoid it than profane it.

Never mind how marriage is viewed apart from Christ. Marriage is following Jesus in a holy work. In marriage God calls two Christians to create a sacred history together. It is a commission. God not only brings them together. He joins them together. (illus. The packed coffins)

You think of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Ruth and Boaz, Zecharias and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Aquila and Priscilla. Their histories were sacred histories. We read their stories and think of how significant their marriages were for the Kingdom of God. We also see how much hurt and distress they created for themselves, their children and future generations when they got so caught up in their own smaller dramas that they lost sight of the larger story.

The same is true for Christians. We get so caught up in lesser commitments, personal agendas, and fifteen minute struggles for power that we lose sight of our own greater commitment, of God’s purpose, and the ever present need to redeem the time God has given us together.

Why marry? That is the question. Is it for our earthly comforts, the satisfaction of desires, the fulfillment of our expectations? Or do we marry to bring glory to God by pointing the sinful world to a reconciling Creator? Jesus laid the groundwork for this understanding in Matthew 19 and Paul completed in Ephesians 5.

Is it a man-centered union in which we ask God to bless our love, or a God-centered union in which Christ displays his power to reconcile?

Most people would agree that forgiveness and reconciliation is part of any marriage. I say that Christian marriage is entirely about forgiveness and reconciliation. Not from time to time, but moment by moment. Not occasionally as needed but continually as always needed. It cannot be withheld because it is never withdrawn. It cannot be denied because it is freely given. Grace is not the part, but the whole of marriage.

If the relationship of husband to wife is modeled after that of Christ to his church, how could it be otherwise? It is because marriage in Christ mirrors the eternal love of God that the vow, “for

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as long as we both shall live,” is made and matters so much. With any less understanding or commitment, that vows makes no real sense at all. (Illustration from home storage)

The Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce. He responded by recalling the God-centered purpose of marriage as God created it. He was questioned further about Moses & divorce. Again he responded. The only occasion for divorce is when one spouse has rejected and deserted the marriage for another – in other words, adultery. Paul would later expand this as the church expanded into pagan culture to include rejection and desertion for another God – desertion by an unbeliever.

Now Jesus’ disciples became upset. “Well, then, it would be better to not get married at all.” Jesus didn’t blink. “You may be right. For the Kingdom of God, it is worth it.” Marriage is all about the Kingdom of God, for the display of His saving mercy. In pursuing this, you become the love of the life of another.